A Montana course may be first layout on Superfund cleanup site

By Peter Blaist

Anaconda, Mont. — Conventional wisdom held that the first golf course ever built on a Superfund site could begin soon. Nicklaus Design has routed a 21-hole layout (three practice holes) and driving range through an abandoned copper smelting facility 30 miles west of Butte.

ARCO owns the 275-acre property, which it will turn over to Deer Lodge County this spring. ARCO will develop the $5 million to $10 million facility. The company and Environmental Protection Agency have agreed to indemnify the county against any future lawsuits that could arise over groundwater contamination or other pollution.

The county will build the clubhouse and operate the golf course, an attractive amenity in an area evolving from a mining-based to a tourism-oriented economy. "It's a unique partnership made possible by the cooperation of the community and EPA's willingness to work with us," said Sandy Stash, ARCO's Montana Superfund manager.

Founded a century ago, Anaconda was one of the country's first planned communities. Copper mined in Butte was transported by rail to Anaconda. Plentiful water and favorable wind patterns to clear out refining-generated smoke made it the perfect site for the smelter. ARCO purchased the smelter in 1976, but had to close it in 1981.

The site is littered with large slag deposits containing arsenic, copper and zinc. Arsenic has the potential to leach into ground water, Stash explained. Copper and zinc could run off into nearby Warm Springs Creek. While not particularly harmful to humans, copper and zinc can be deadly to the Rocky Mountain trout that inhabit the stream.

A clay cap over hot spots containing large arsenic deposits was needed to eliminate leaching, according to Nicklaus architect Bruce Borland. Working with ARCO engineers, Nicklaus routed the course over the hottest spots, mounding additional soil over certain areas to create extra groundwater protection plus interesting design contours in the largely flat landscape.

An intricate drainage system channels any copper- and zinc-containing runoff into a holding lagoon far from the trout-laden stream. Lime and other amendments have been added to soils in the roughs.

"We want to remedy any potential problems now so that the superintendent won't have to worry and the owners end up with something that will be a maintenance headache," Borland said.

On the plus side, the abandoned smelter afforded Nicklaus a creative opportunity. "The tee shot on the 3rd hole, for instance, plays straight toward the foothills and the old smelter ruins," Borland said. "The approach runs parallel to the foundation walls. Passing from the 3rd green to the 4th tee you climb about 20 feet through..."