Montana course may be first layout on Superfund cleanup site

By PETER BLAIS

ANACONDA, Mont. — Construction of what is believed to be 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 a 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 won't 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 and to the top of the foundation."

The course winds through 25-to-30-foot-high black slag piles that are particularly striking on the 6th, 7th and 9th holes. Signage will describe historically significant sites.

"I was a little apprehensive about working on a Superfund site," Borland said. "But it's worked well. It's an interesting challenge with a lot of twists."

The course was five years in permitting, Stash said. All local, state and federal permits are in place. The only remaining roadblock involves water rights. But since the project rests on what Stash describes as a prolific aquifer, she expects that to be resolved soon.

"We expect to go out to bid in mid-March, receive our permits by late March, and start construction in mid-to-late April." she said.

The course should be playable by early 1996. It will draw on urban areas within a 60-mile radius — Butte, Helena and Dillon — and tourist migration between Yellowstone and Glacier national parks. Greens fees will be $20 to $30.

Are any of the other 1,289 proposed Superfund locations potential golf course sites?

"If, and it's a very big IF, you determine the site will help with the clean up in the strictest sense," said EPA public liaison officer Michael Scott.

EPA divides Superfund sites into two categories — those requiring immediate emergency removal of toxic materials and those needing to be returned to something approaching their natural state.

Those needing emergency removal, obviously, would not be appropriate golf course sites, at least in the immediate future, Scott explained. Those needing longer-term restoration work could be possibilities, he added.

Complicating development, however, is a federal law stating that any person or institution that owns a Superfund site can be held liable for emergency removal or clean-up costs if a problem arises. At Anaconda, for instance, if arsenic was detected in the ground water 20 years from now, the course operator *could* be held liable. That's why ARCO agreed to indemnify the county against future damages.

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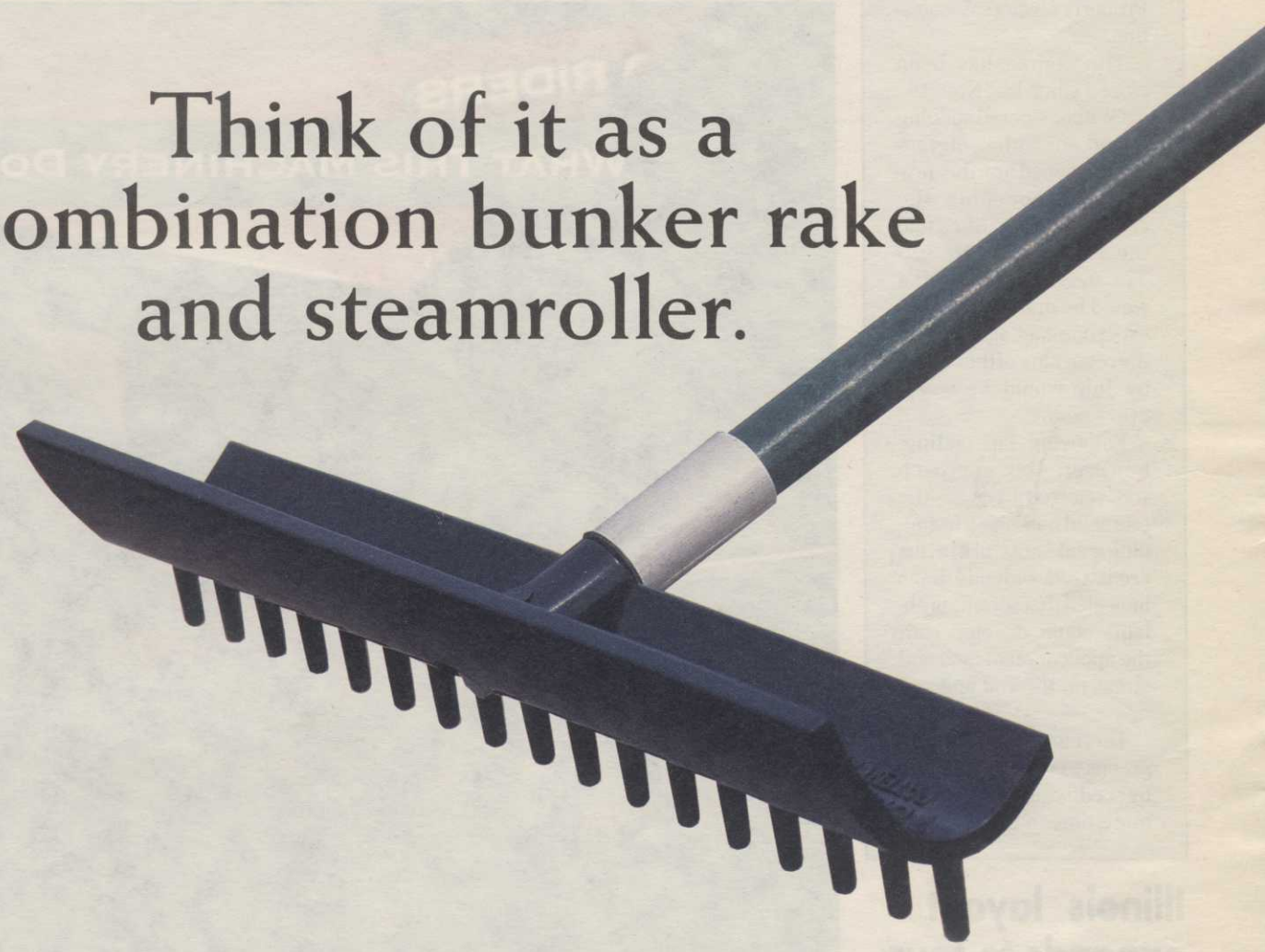

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