



BILL RICHARDSON
GOVERNOR

State of New Mexico
ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT
Office of the Secretary
Harold Runnels Building
1190 St. Francis Drive, P.O. Box 26110
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87502-6110
Telephone (505) 827-2855
Fax (505) 827-2836



RON CURRY
SECRETARY

DERRITH WATCHMAN-MOORE
DEPUTY SECRETARY

September 12, 2006
For Immediate Release

Contact: Marissa Stone, NMED Communications Director
Phone: (505) 827-0314 or (505) 231-0475

Environment Department Requires Trucking Company that works for Phelps Dodge to Clean Up Groundwater Contamination from Acid Spill near Silver City

(Santa Fe, NM) — The New Mexico Environment Department will require a trucking company that hauls sulfuric acid for Phelps Dodge Mining Company to clean up groundwater contamination created after acid spilled from a truck during a traffic crash several weeks ago.

Sulfuric acid flowed along the highway and about half a mile down an arroyo on Phelps Dodge property 10 miles south of Silver City on Aug. 14 after a Chemical Transportation Inc. (C.T.I.) truck hauling sulfuric acid and another vehicle crashed along N.M. 90. No residents live in the area.

“The New Mexico Environment Department has been working with Phelps Dodge and C.T.I. to ensure groundwater is protected,” said state Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry. “Although Phelps Dodge is not directly responsible for the spill, they are helping C.T.I. with the clean up. We will do everything possible to maintain the environmental integrity of the area.”

Sulfuric acid is produced by industrial processes such as copper smelting. Phelps Dodge also applies the acid to stockpiles of ore to extract copper.

About 3,000 gallons of 93 percent to 98 percent strength sulfuric acid spilled from the C.T.I. truck into the soil. C.T.I. excavated the soil to remove and determine the extent of the contamination. After the spill, pH values of the soil in the area were about 4 and pH values in groundwater ranged from 3 to 3.5. Existing pH values in groundwater in the area of the spill range from 6 to 7.

Low pH in groundwater is not a primary health concern – carbonated beverages have a pH that ranges from 2 to 4. However, low pH in groundwater causes contaminants such as heavy metals to more easily dissolve into groundwater from surrounding sediments. Those sediments can be detrimental to human health.

For more information, call NMED Communications Director Marissa Stone at (505) 827-0314 or (505) 231-0475.

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