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U.S.

Southwest Towns Still Struggle With Toxic River Spill

Six months after EPA crew accidentally unleashed waste at a gold mine, spring snowmelt threatens to stir up contaminants



Brian Dils tends to the animals on his family land in Cedar Hill, N.M. Mr. Dils and his family depend on water from the Animas River and they are concerned the lack of EPA testing will expose them to harmful levels of lead as more toxic sediment gets stirred up in the spring runoff. *PHOTO: STEVEN ST. JOHN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By JIM CARLTON

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CEDAR HILL, N.M.—For about two weeks last August, Brian Dils and his family didn't touch the well water that flowed into their house near the Animas River here, after three million gallons of toxic sludge spilled into the waterway. The family of five showered at a friend's house and hauled home 1,000 gallons of donated drinking water until tests by the Environmental Protection Agency showed the water was safe.

But the EPA hasn't returned to conduct more tests, and now Mr. Dils and others are worried that lead and other toxic materials that settled in the river will be stirred up and contaminate the water again as the Animas swells with spring snowmelt from the Rocky Mountains.

"I'm nervous about the long-term effects," said Mr. Dils, a 46-year-old oil-field worker. "It will be a matter of testing our well continuously, but we don't have money for that."

Officials in New Mexico and Utah, which draw from the Animas watershed, say the EPA, which accidentally triggered the spill, has failed to spearhead a comprehensive plan to manage the spring runoff or conduct long-term monitoring. For instance, they say, there is no federal plan to test about 2,000 private wells in New Mexico that border the Animas and the San Juan River it feeds into.

That has left communities trying to make sure their water is safe for drinking and farming. Some towns and cities that pull from the Animas have shut their intake valves and turned to reservoirs in the midst of a drought.

Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and the Navajo and Southern Ute tribes are monitoring the water themselves, in part after learning that an EPA plan wouldn't provide them with real-time data on contamination, or test as many sites as they want.



The Animas River is seen just south of Durango, Colo., on Tuesday, March 22, 2016. PHOTO: STEVEN ST. JOHN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"The fundamental problem is there is no engagement from EPA," said New Mexico Environment Secretary Ryan Flynn, whose state has the biggest affected population.

Colorado isn't critical of the EPA, as the agency has given the state funds to do some of the work and the state is asking for more, said Mark Salley, spokesman for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

EPA spokeswoman Nancy Grantham said that her agency "worked round the clock" during the emergency spill response and that it continues to work with state, local and tribal officials to evaluate long-term health and environment impacts.

She added that the EPA is conducting post-spill sampling of the watershed and will share those results at regular intervals when they are completed. The first batch of test results released last month showed no unsafe spikes in pollution, she said.

Around 200,000 people in three states drink from the 400-mile Animas and San Juan river system, which ultimately feeds into the Colorado River that supplies much of the Southwest.

Last summer, an EPA crew cleaning the old Gold King Mine, in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado, accidentally triggered the spill that unleashed the waste. The EPA has taken responsibility for the spill, saying a team of contractors working on the mine underestimated the amount of water built up inside and inadvertently triggered the accident.



Rancher Lin Blancett, whose cows had to be evacuated because of the Gold King Mine spill, rides through his herd, checking on newborn calves. *PHOTO: STEVEN ST. JOHN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The sludge turned the Animas mustard-yellow for days, and federal officials found high levels of toxicity from lead and arsenic. EPA officials eventually cleared the water for drinking and recreation, but warned that chemicals in the riverbed could be stirred up again and that a full cleanup could take years.

The EPA's Ms. Grantham said the agency is aware of the problems that spring runoff could cause, and is providing downstream communities with technical support and \$2 million for long-term monitoring.

That amount is far lower than what is needed, local officials say. New Mexico officials say their share is expected to be about \$465,000, but that they need \$6 million to fund long-term monitoring including regular well testing for people who rely on untreated well water, like Mr. Dils.

Utah needs \$1.2 million, but also is expected to receive \$465,000, said Erica Gaddis, assistant director for the division of water quality of that state's Department of Environmental Quality. Some of that money is needed to conduct samples of river water to measure for metals during the runoff, she said.

"The EPA plan doesn't give us the data we feel we need to report to the public," Ms. Gaddis said.

Many public health officials are especially concerned about lead, which the EPA says can cause behavior and learning problems in children. Elevated lead has turned up in a number U.S. cities' drinking systems in recent years, and has caused a health crisis in Flint, Mich., amid problems with aging infrastructure.

Few are expecting a Flint-like situation in the Four Corners states. But residents worry whether a buildup of metals over time will pose health threats. The EPA has estimated that 880,000 pounds of heavy metals spilled into the Animas, and that more has been slowly leaking into the river for years from abandoned mines.

Communities have begun deploying their own monitoring systems. River gauges used by Farmington, N.M., at a cost of \$160,000 to the city, detected spikes in particulates that EPA research has determined in other cases correlate to elevated levels of lead and other materials. The city of 45,000 shut down its intake pipes as a precaution at least a dozen times in recent weeks, said David Sypher, public works director. The water goes through a reservoir and treatment plant before reaching homes. Still, "we don't want to be compromised at any level," Mr. Sypher said.

Rancher Tweeti Blancett relies on the Animas to supply much of the water needs for her 200-acre ranch along the river in Cedar Hill, N.M. She moved 60 cows to higher ground last year in case the spill contaminated her irrigation ditch, and now worries about potential health effects on the animals.

“I guess the thing that bothers me most is we still don’t know what is in the water,” said Ms. Blancett, 70, who has also asked the EPA for more frequent testing.

Mr. Dils, the oil-field worker, said he can’t afford the \$200 per test to periodically check his well, or a filtration system, which could cost as much as \$5,000.

“It’s not like these people contaminated the wells themselves,” said Michele Truby-Tillen, floodplain manager for New Mexico’s San Juan County office of emergency management. “It was my impression it was the EPA’s purpose to make sure these parties are taken care of.”

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