

EPA puts Gold King Mine, other Colorado sites on priority list and pegs acid muck flow at 5.4 m gallons a day

EPA targets 10 new sites nationwide for cleanups

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Moving to deal with acid metals contamination of creeks estimated at 5.4 million gallons a day, the Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday put Colorado's Gold King Mine and 47 other nearby mining-related sites on the National Priorities List for Superfund cleanup.

EPA officials said they'll move diligently toward cleanup along Animas River headwaters above Silverton — "the Bonita Peak Mining District." It was among 10 environmental disasters nationwide newly targeted for cleanup — [dependent on Congress providing funds](#). The federal Superfund program involves investigating and cleaning up the nation's worst disasters to protect human health and the environment.

"Listing the Bonita Peak Mining District on the National Priorities List is an important step that enables EPA to secure the necessary resources to investigate and address contamination concerns of San Juan and La Plata Counties, as well as other downstream communities in New Mexico, Utah, and the Navajo Nation," EPA regional administrator Shaun McGrath said in a prepared statement.

"We look forward to continuing our efforts with the state of Colorado, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S Forest Service, tribal governments and our community partners to address the impacts of acid mine drainage on the Animas River."



Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

The Gold King Mine can be seen from above on August 17, 2016 near Silverton, Colorado. A mining and safety team contracted by the Environmental Protection Agency is working on the mine north of Silverton with heavy equipment to secure and consolidate a safe way to enter the mine and access contaminated water.

This EPA decision had been expected for months, part of a federal process. Work at the Gold King has begun. The Colorado sites draw attention because, on Aug. 5 2015, an EPA-run crew assessing how to open the Gold King as acid metals liquids built up inside accidentally triggered a [3 million-gallon blowout](#) that turned the Animas mustard-yellow through three states.

On April 7, EPA officials proposed putting the Bonita district on the priorities list and opened a period for public comment.

The district consists of 35 dormant mines, seven tunnels, four heaps of tailings and two study areas — sites located along Mineral Creek, Cement Creek and the Upper Animas. These waterways flow into the main stem of the Animas River just below Silverton.

Mining in the area began in the 1860s. For decades, water quality has been impaired. Colorado health officials after 1998 designated some portions of the Animas, below Cement Creek, officially impaired due to toxic metals including lead, iron and aluminum.

EPA data on 32 sources in the area, discharging contaminants at a combined rate of 5.4 million gallons per day, identify contaminants including cadmium, copper, manganese and zinc.

“Listing the Bonita Peak Mining District is critical to addressing historic mining impacts in San Juan County and our downstream communities,” Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment director of environmental programs Martha Rudolph said in a statement issued by the EPA as part of their announcement.

“We are committed to working closely with our federal and state partners to achieve an effective cleanup, while ensuring that all our affected communities have a voice in the process as this moves forward,” the statement said.

U.S. Rep. Scott Tipton expressed hope cleanup will be done in a way that generates local jobs.

“I’m hopeful that with this designation the EPA will continue to collaborate with local, tribal and state officials and work to protect the local economy, maximizing local employment opportunities where possible, and providing adequate funding to ensure the cleanup begins as quickly as possible,” Tipton said in a prepared statement.

Conservationists, too, welcomed the steps toward action.

“Anglers and sportsmen strongly support this process,” said Trout Unlimited San Juan Mountains coordinator Ty Churchwell.

“We’ll monitor the progress in the months and years to come to ensure the cleanup is done right and supports a high-quality fishery in the Animas. It’s our hope that Congress appropriates adequate funding to begin the cleanup soon,” Churchwell said.

“Otherwise this listing will be an empty promise.”

<http://www.denverpost.com/2016/09/07/gold-king-animas-mining-sites-disaster-declaration/>