

For Immediate Release
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Water, communities safe after recent Gold King Mine release

SAN JUAN COUNTY — Water in the San Juan and Animas rivers is safe following the mid-March failure of the wastewater treatment facility in Gladstone, Colorado, which treats drainage from Gold King Mine.

A power outage at the facility, which removes heavy metals and other contaminants from the wastewater, caused untreated wastewater from the mine to bypass the facility and enter Cement Creek for around 48 hours starting on March 14. Power has since been restored and the treatment plant is functioning.

“During this incident, we closely monitored real-time data from sondes installed in the Animas and San Juan rivers,” said New Mexico Environment Department Chief Scientist Dennis McQuillan. “Sonde readings for turbidity, pH and electrical conductivity provided no indication that downstream water users would be adversely impacted by this incident.”



U.S. Geological Survey staff from the New Mexico Water Science Center sampled water in the Animas and San Juan rivers March 16-20 to analyze for the concentration of metals. (Courtesy of USGS)

Fortunately, because of communication plans put in place since the initial Gold King Mine spill in 2015, local emergency managers and river stakeholders quickly learned of the failure. The cities of Aztec and Farmington, irrigation channel and ditch operators, Navajo Nation communities and others along the San Juan and Animas rivers were promptly alerted to the situation and took action. The small number of ditches running at this time were able to mitigate risk by closing head gates and the cities of Aztec and Farmington closed off water supplies. The City of Farmington also maintains water testing stations which automatically close off the water supply when contaminants in the river are detected.

“The system worked like it was supposed to. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency notified my office and we in turn completed the process with our local partners,” said San Juan County Emergency Manager Mike Mestas. “We also communicated with our Navajo Nation Emergency Management partners. We thank the New Mexico Environment Department for their continued collaboration, immediate actions and concern toward the citizens of San Juan County.”

Immediately following the treatment facility failure, partners across the watershed mobilized teams to collect river water samples for laboratory testing. The EPA announced preliminary water quality sampling data today. That data confirms the real-time data provided by the water quality sondes, providing no evidence that the incident created adverse impacts to downstream drinking water or agricultural users in New Mexico.

While contaminant levels remained well below regulatory limits during the incident, heavy metals may increase during the spring snowmelt as legacy mining contaminants stored in river sediment are transported downstream by increased flow. Water quality sondes will continue to be monitored and the New Mexico Environment Department is updating a Spring Runoff Preparedness Plan in coordination with San Juan County and other local stakeholders.

As upstream partners continue to work to protect the precious water resources of the state, New Mexico agencies stand ready to respond to water quality issues resulting from the Gold King Mine spill and beyond. The testing, systems, communication and notification systems implemented after the spill worked effectively, providing assurance that New Mexico agencies are prepared to protect New Mexicans in the event of another river emergency.

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