

After years of holding back, Colorado mines unleash polluted water

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.24.15

Word Count **925**



Hillside drainage flows past an abandoned mine structure in the San Juan Mountains north of Silverton in southwestern Colorado. Pollution is spilling into a nearby creek and into the Animas River. AP/Brennan Linsley

SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS, Colo. — These towering mountains poured gold and silver into the cities of the valley below, but nothing comes without a price.

Environmental agencies have worried for decades about the poisonous waste and polluted water left behind by the mines.

Locals thought the problem had been solved by pushing the toxic water back into the mountain, but then the mountain pushed back.

On Aug. 5, an environmental cleaning team narrowly escaped a 20-foot-high wall of orange water that poured out of the Gold King Mine on Bonita Peak. The mine is located about 12 miles north of Silverton, Colorado.

Last Monday, the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) inspector general announced it will investigate the spill and the agency's response.

A Flood Of Poisons

About 3 million gallons of water filled with cadmium, lead and arsenic poured into tiny Cement Creek and from there into the Animas River. Colorado and New Mexico officials cautioned people to stay out of the water. They also temporarily cut off irrigation to farms before restoring some water last week.

Nor is this the only source of pollution here. Other closed mines continue to pour 540 to 740 gallons of acidic water per minute into the Animas.

Who is to blame? The mining companies? The regulators who allowed the companies to plug a drainage ditch and let the water build up inside the mountain? Or the citizens of this town, who battled an EPA plan to clean up the area with taxpayer funds for more than 20 years?

Nasty Spill Was Long Time Coming

No one can say for sure, but one thing is clear: The Gold King spill was years in the making.

"What's the original sin? Plugging that mine, then letting that water sit and letting the companies get away with it," said Mitchell Gillon, who worked in the mines for three years before getting laid off. "The EPA didn't make them fix it, and they're not going to do it on their own."

The mines' history is complicated. No one can say with certainty whether one mine is connected to another and, if so, whose polluted water came out of Gold King.

"We love the place we live," Gillon said, his comments delivered in a slight drawl.

Resident Calls For Kinder, Gentler Mining Practices

"I want my kids, when I have them, to scratch their knees and bump their elbows here," he said. "We don't want this city gone, but we need mining back, responsible mining that won't dump metals like they did" in the 1890s.

Gold King closed in the 1920s, but another mine, the Sunnyside, was believed to have access to the same area. To reach it, Standard Metal drilled a massive pipe into the mountain in 1959, aiming to tap the vein of gold from underneath.

The American Tunnel, as it was called, collected water from Sunnyside mine, and possibly from other mines. Then it dumped the toxic water into Cement Creek.

The Sunnyside mine was closed in 1991, but poisonous mine waste remained. Company officials' solution was to seal the hole with a concrete plug the size of a railway car, while a similar plug was used at Gold King.

Delaying The Inevitable Mess, Cleanup

For decades, that seemed to be the end of the story. Polluted water continued to seep out of the mine, but not from the American Tunnel. Facing yet more fines, the company that owned the mine struck a deal with the state. They agreed that the mine would continue to drip toxic metals into the water, but Sunnyside Gold would do multimillion-dollar cleanup projects downstream.

At the time, this was considered a success story in dealing with the EPA, which investigated the area as a potential Superfund site. The government program cleans up hazardous waste sites around the country with taxpayer money.

But Silverton is a tourist town now. So locals and the mining companies joined forces as the Animas River Stakeholders Group, seeking to avoid being labeled a Superfund site, which carries a stigma.

Mine Owners Blaming Each Other, EPA

Now, the owners of Gold King and Sunnyside are pointing fingers at each other and blaming the EPA.

“Kinross Gold Corp. (owner of the Sunnyside) is a rogue mining company,” said Todd Hennis, who owns the Gold King Mine and blames Sunnyside for the water.

“I believe Sunnyside knew it was going to happen and they stalled any action because it will cost them money to fix it,” Hennis said.

Kinross denied that Sunnyside had any involvement in the spill.

“The representative of Gold King Mine is making unsubstantiated, baseless and irresponsible allegations,” Kinross said. “To reiterate, while the state-approved ... (plug) Sunnyside completed was always expected to return the local water table towards historic natural levels, it did not cause the water buildup at Gold King.”

Are The Two Mines Connected?

Without going into the flooded mine, EPA officials and mine experts say, it is impossible to know if the mines are connected and what may have connected them. It could be ether cracks, fissures, fractures or even exploratory drill holes after World War II.

Since the spill, locals have complained that the EPA ignored warnings about toxic mine water and responded to questions with vague answers.

In a conference call with reporters last week, EPA Area Commander David Ostrander said the Sunnyside and Gold King mines “may have some connections back and forth.” When asked later by email to clarify whether he believed such connections were possible, he replied, “We aren’t going to comment on this.”