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## **EPA-caused contaminated water spill from Colorado mine causes concerns in southeastern Utah**

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by Jeff Richards

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One week after the accidental release of an estimated 3 million gallons of contaminated water from the abandoned Gold King Mine site near Silverton, in San Juan County, Colorado, officials are scrambling for solutions and answers. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials have said the plume contains pollutants including arsenic, lead, copper, aluminum and cadmium.

The Aug. 5 incident was triggered by a crew led by the EPA, which was reportedly doing mitigation work on the mine. The irony that the EPA itself caused the environmental disaster was not lost on many. Although nobody was injured in the mishap, its highly visible effects were immediate and far-reaching.

“I’m very sorry for what happened,” EPA Emergency Response Director David Ostrander reportedly said during a public meeting held in Durango shortly after the incident occurred. “This is a huge tragedy. We typically respond to emergencies, not cause them.”

According to reports, the EPA-led work crews were using heavy machinery to enter the Gold King Mine when they ruptured a shaft filled with wastewater, sending mustard-colored water gushing into nearby Cement Creek, a tributary of the Animas River.

From there, the plume of sediment flowed downstream at an estimated speed of 4 mph, turning the water an alarming orange-yellow color as it went.

The amount of wastewater released initially was thought to be about 1 million gallons, but officials later upped that estimate to 3 million gallons.

The contaminated water moved down the Animas River southward through Colorado and into New Mexico, where the Animas joins the San Juan River near Farmington. From that point, the San Juan heads northwest before entering Utah near the Four Corners area.

Earlier this week, officials and scientists from Utah’s Division of Water Quality (DWQ) were waiting where the San Juan River crosses the state line, to test the water to determine if any measurable difference in water quality could be detected.

Utah DWQ officials said Aug. 11 that the tests so far suggested that the contaminated plume may have been naturally diluted and neutralized to the point where it was virtually undetectable by the time it reached Utah.

“If the contaminated plume has in fact arrived in Utah as predicted, the pH data suggests that natural processes in the San Juan River have neutralized the plume’s acidity,” stated a DWQ update posted on Aug. 11.

Utah water quality officials said they are also testing the San Juan River water’s concentrations of heavy metals such as copper, cadmium, lead, and zinc, in both dissolved and undissolved states.

“Analyzing for both total metals and dissolved metals helps to ensure that the plume will be detected even if most of the metals have switched from dissolved to undissolved,” the DWQ news release stated.

However, the results of both the before-and-after-tests were not expected to be available until at least Wednesday afternoon, Aug. 12.

“At this time, the San Juan County Department of Health recommends that river recreationists bring their own drinking water and not use river water until data are available to confirm that pollutants in the river are at acceptable concentrations for drinking,” according to a statement from the Utah Department of Environmental Quality.

Federal EPA officials said they are committed to working closely with response agencies, along with state and local officials in Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah, in addition to leaders from the Southern Ute Tribe and the Navajo Nation.

In Colorado, Gov. John Hickenlooper declared a state of emergency in the wake of the incident, allocating \$500,000 to pay for response and assessment.

According to the updates posted on the EPA’s On-Scene Coordinator website at [epaosc.org](http://epaosc.org), the agency is endeavoring to share collected data and other information as quickly as possible with the public, while officials evaluate the effects the spill may have on drinking water, public health, agriculture, fish and wildlife. The EPA’s website has also posted an online claim form for those seeking reparations for damages.

The EPA has said it would also continue to treat drainage at the mine site, sample the Animas River corridor, and coordinate response efforts with state, federal, tribal and local officials, in addition to affected landowners, water users, and other members of the public. The agency is also providing drinking water and water testing to private well owners.

A number of questions still remain. With the federal government itself admittedly responsible for the incident, it seems certain that taxpayers will end up footing the bill. But the economic effects could extend into the private sector as well, which could be cause for concern in southeastern Utah, where water-based recreational activities such as river rafting, fishing and boating are highly popular

and commercially important.

“Many uncertainties still surround us,” said Bayley Hedglin, executive director of the Monticello-based San Juan Chamber of Commerce. Hedglin said that while she was encouraged by the news that the initial samples seem to show no major contamination, she said she is worried about the public’s reaction.

“I feel the major implications for our area and tourism will be the public perception surrounding the spill,” Hedglin said. “The pictures circulating are no doubt abhorrent. Yet we do not know the true implications of the spill to our region. The chamber’s concern stems around the concern of our out-of-the-area guests and their possible avoidance of the area as a result of the spill.”

“Local rafting companies are still being given the green light for trips,” she added. “We hope our visitors will still come and enjoy what San Juan County has to offer. With bated breath, we wait to see the long-term impacts and support the Navajo Nation and the county with their pre-emptive measures to secure the safety of our local residents, livestock and agriculture.”

Authorities estimate that there are approximately 55,000 abandoned mines throughout the western United States, many of which are located near rivers, creeks, and other water resources.

John Weisheit, director of the Moab-based conservation group Living Rivers, said while contamination incidents like the one at the Gold King Mine don’t usually occur on a such a large and visible scale, they are an ongoing problem, and that the concern extends to many other major waterways, including the Colorado River near Moab.

“There’s going to be more of this happening in the future,” Weisheit said this week. “We have a legacy of mines, and gas, and oil wells, much like the Atlas uranium tailings pile that need to be cleaned up. And now it’s kind of important because the Colorado River water is over-allocated and diminishing, so it’s going to be hard to dilute this pollution.”

“It’s [also] going to aggravate the endangered species projects and all the money that’s been spent over the years to help these endangered fish,” he said.

Weisheit said he would like to see federal legislation enacted to protect the Colorado River in particular.

“It needs to get out of committee and it needs to include the upper basin,” he said. “Especially now that oil companies are bound and determined to do oil shale and tar sands and uranium mining and fracking and all that, we need something to protect the river.”

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