

Waste water from Gold King Mine reaches NM, Durango declares State of Local Emergency

The levels of

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DENVER & FARMINGTON, N.M. (AP) - A State of Local Emergency has been declared for the City of Durango and La Plata County due to the contamination of the Animas River, a spokesperson with the city of Durango said Sunday.

The proclamation was made effective Sunday at noon after officials consulted with the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, the Town of Silverton, the San Juan Basin Health Department, and San Juan Counties from both Colorado and New Mexico after approximately more than a million gallons of wastewater accidentally spilled from the Gold King Mine.

“This action has been taken due to the serious nature of the incident and to convey the grave concerns that local elected officials have to ensure that all appropriate levels of state and federal resources are brought to bear to assist our community not only in actively managing this tragic incident but also to recover from it,” explained La Plata County Manager Joe Kerby.

Local authorities also announced they would be live streaming a public meeting, which would be held at Miller Middle School's auditorium, 2608 Junction Street in Durango. The link can be accessed through the La Planta County Website

(<http://www.co.laplata.co.us/emergency>), the San Juan Basin Health Department's website (<http://sjbhd.org/>), as well as La Plata County's Government Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/LaPlataCounty?fref=ts>) and the San Juan Basin Health Department Facebook page. (<https://www.facebook.com/sanjuanbasinhealth?fref=ts>)

The yellow sludge reached northern New Mexico, a state official said Saturday.

The plume arrived in the city of Aztec on Friday night and Farmington on Saturday morning, San Juan County Emergency Management Director Don Cooper said.

Officials in both cities shut down the river's access to water treatment plants and say the communities have a 90-day supply of water and other water sources to draw from.

"There's not a lot we can do. We can keep people away (from the river) and keep testing," Cooper said. "We still don't know how bad it is."

The wastewater from the mine spilling into the Animas River on Wednesday when a cleanup crew supervised by the Environmental Protection Agency accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine.

RELATED: Animas River closing following contaminated water spill from Gold King Mine (<http://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/local-news/1m-gal-of-contaminated-water-spilled-from-gold-king-mine-into-animas-river>)

The mine has been inactive since 1923.

No health hazard has been detected, but tests were being analyzed. Federal officials say the spill contains heavy metals including lead and arsenic.

The EPA released additional information Saturday afternoon during a conference call with several news organizations.

EPA says plume is still moving 4 to 5 miles per hour -- no reports of any wildlife deaths yet. #animasriver (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/animasriver?src=hash>)

— *Jennifer Kovaleski (@JennKovaleski)* August 8, 2015

(<https://twitter.com/JennKovaleski/status/630133472254935040>)

"It looks terrible, and none of us want to see that," said Ronald Cohen an environmental engineer at the Colorado School of Mines.

Cohen explained that the yellow-orange color in the river is mainly from iron.

He said to fully understand what happened you have to look at Colorado's mining history.

"There's a very big role for history because you're looking at a mine - the Gold King Mine and it was last worked in 1923," said Cohen.

More than 90 years ago, he said miners would pump the waste out because there were no regulations. Once they were put in place that stopped and now the Gold King Mine is one of hundreds filled with contaminated water in our state.

Contaminated water, that needs to be cleaned up.

"450 that have problems discharging acid mine drainage," further explained Cohen. 'It's just the process of mining that you get that material that water to become contaminated."

The question now is how toxic is it? The EPA said it found trace levels of arsenic in the water, but still hasn't said how high the metal levels are.

"Worst case scenario is if you had very high levels of iron, zinc, copper, cadmium, then there would be a big concern," said Cohen.

The Center for Biological Diversity called the EPA response to the spill "inadequate" in a statement released Thursday

(http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/news/press_releases/2015/animas-river-spill-08-06-2015.html):

“Endangered species downstream of this spill are already afflicted by same toxic compounds like mercury and selenium that may be in this waste,” said McKinnon. “These species are hanging by a thread, and every new bit of toxic exposure makes a bad situation worse. EPA’s downplaying of potential impacts is troubling and raises deeper questions about the thoroughness of its mine-reclamation efforts.”

In addition to New Mexico, wastewater from the mine was also inching toward Utah.

The Animas flows into the San Juan River in New Mexico, and the San Juan flows into Utah, where it joins the Colorado River in Lake Powell.

The spilled water also contained cadmium, aluminum, copper and calcium, but the concentrations were not yet known.

While awaiting further results on the concentration levels of the metals in the water, the EPA released results Saturday showing how acidic the water became after the spill.

In Cement Creek, near the spill, the water registered a pH level of 3.74, which the EPA said is similar to the acidity of tomato juice and apples. Further downstream, in Silverton, pH levels were found to be about 4.8, which is similar to liquid black coffee.

The EPA warned people to stay out of the river and to keep domestic animals from drinking from it. Local officials declared stretches of the river off-limits in Colorado and New Mexico.

MORE: White House Petition created, asks government to hold EPA employees accountable for wastewater spill (<https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/hold-epa-employees-responsible-discharge-mine-waste-animas-river-colorado>)

At least two of the heavy metals found in the waste water can be lethal for humans with long-term exposure. Arsenic at high levels can cause blindness, paralysis and cancer. Lead poisoning can create muscle and vision problems for adults, harm development in fetuses and lead to kidney disease, developmental problems and sometimes death in children, the EPA said.

Water continues to spill from the mine at a rate of about 700 gallons per minute, Joan Card, an adviser to Environmental Protection Agency Regional Director Shaun McGrath, said Saturday. Crews were building containment ponds to catch and treat the water.

Water samples were also tested in New Mexico, but no results had been released.

Officials said the contamination would likely settle into the sediment in Lake Powell. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area officials said visitors will be warned starting Monday to avoid drinking, swimming or boating on affected stretches of the lake and river until further notice.

The spill from the mine flowed down Cement Creek and into the scenic Animas River, which is popular with boaters and anglers.

When the spill happened, the EPA-supervised crew was trying to enter the mine to pump out and treat the water, EPA spokeswoman Lisa McClain-Vanderpool said.

Durango City Council and La Plata County Commissioners will consider the renewal of the emergency declaration at their respective public meetings to be held on Tuesday, August 11.

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