

Three million gallons of hazardous mine waste released into Colorado river

Kevin Martinez
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A massive spill in Colorado has unleashed more than 3 million gallons of hazardous mine waste into the Animas River, a tributary of the Colorado River, which provides much of the drinking and irrigation water for the southwestern United States. The spill was triggered when employees working for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) were trying to investigate a mine for contamination.

The San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado are home to many abandoned mines with ponds that are filled with contaminated water. As a result, many of the rivers are polluted with regular amounts of toxic water, killing off all aquatic life in the area. The last major spill in Silverton, which is where the recent disaster took place, was in 1975 and polluted nearly 100 miles of the Animas River with 127 million tons of hazardous waste.

According to the Colorado Division of Mining, Reclamation and Safety, the state is riddled with 22,000 abandoned mines. The mines fill up with water that is contaminated with zinc, copper, cadmium, iron, lead, manganese, and aluminum. Because of loose regulation by the state and federal governments, the mining companies would dump the toxic water into streams or back into tailings ponds where the water would get even more acidic.

The EPA's task is to turn areas like Silverton into "superfund" sites that would attract investment to clean up. The town as recently as 2014 resisted the label of superfund out of fear that it would impact tourism. The EPA agreed to list Silverton in the "National Priority List" to improve water quality in the area. The most recent disaster occurred when EPA workers were trying to plug a mine below the Red and Bonita Mine to reduce acid runoff.

The project had begun in July. The Gold King Mine,

which was connected with the Red and Bonita Mine, released its toxic water into the Animas River on August 4. Peter Butler, a coordinator with the Animas River Stakeholders Group, told KUNC radio that the EPA knew that there was water in the mine, saying, "It was known that there was a pool of water back in the mine, and EPA had a plan to remove that water and treat it, you know, slowly. But things didn't go quite the way they planned and there was a lot more water in there than they thought, and it just kind of burst out of the mine."

The river near the mine is home to a trout fishery. Between 2005 and 2015, three out of four fish species that lived in the Upper Animas River died off. The U.S. Geological Survey has said that the volume of insects and the number of insect species has declined. Since 2006, the USGS said that water flowing under Bakers Bridge, near Silverton, has concentrations of zinc that are toxic to animal life.

Jonathan Thompson, senior editor of the environmental magazine *High Country News*, told KUNC that normally the river is a deep green color but that, "right now where that has hit, it is bright orange. It's like orange crush, but a really thick orange crush." He also compared it to carrot juice because of its thick consistency. The EPA has instructed people to avoid contact with the water because mine waste is full of heavy metals and sediment.

The EPA has also confirmed lead concentrations of over 3,500 times normal levels above the town of Durango. Debra McKean, a toxicologist with the EPA, discussed the disaster with KUNC. "Yes, those numbers are high and they are scary because they seem so high," she said, "especially compared to the baseline numbers." As the toxic water flows downstream, she explained, the lead levels will peak and then decrease.

A state of emergency has been declared in the town of Durango, Colorado and surrounding La Plata County as new test results have shown an increase in arsenic levels and some mercury has been detected. This spill has already reached New Mexico and Utah, passing down the Animas River and into the San Juan River, which flows south and west across northern New Mexico, then northwest into Utah, eventually emptying into the Colorado River at Glen Canyon.

The EPA has been criticized for waiting a whole day to announce the spill. In response, officials said it took time for them to realize the severity of the spill. As part of the recent budget cuts, the EPA saw its funding decline for a fifth year in a row, reducing staffing levels to their lowest in 25 years.

The EPA estimated that a limestone water treatment plant to clean toxic water in the region would only cost between \$12 million and \$17 million, and \$1 million a year after that. The last mining company to operate in Silverton was Sunnyside Gold Corp., which offered to pay \$6.5 million in exchange for being released from all liability, including cleanup of pollution. The company was eventually bought by Kinross Gold Corp., a transnational mining company, in 2003. According to its fourth-quarter report, the company made nearly \$1 billion in revenue in 2013.



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