

Polluted water pours down mountains years after mines close in Colorado

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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. — On Aug. 5, a team was examining a former gold mine. Suddenly, they were almost hit by a 20-foot-high wall of orange water pouring out.

The water was filled with poisonous chemicals from the mine. In the end, 3 million gallons of water poured into tiny Cement Creek. From there, it filled the Animas River. Officials warned people to stay out of the water. They also cut off water to farms.

Last Monday, the government's Environment Protection Agency (EPA) announced it will investigate.

Other closed mines are also polluting the water. They pour 540 to 740 gallons of toxic water per minute into the Animas. There are about 14,000 gallons in the typical swimming pool.

Who is to blame? The mining companies? The officials who allowed the companies to let the water build up inside the mountain? Or the citizens of this town? For 20 years, they fought a government plan to clean up the area.

Pollution Problems Began Years Ago

No one can say for sure, but one thing is clear. The problems started long ago.

The mines' history is complicated. The mines may be connected underground. No one can say whose polluted water came out of Gold King.

"We love the place we live," said Mitchell Gillon, who worked in the mines for three years.

"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."

Gold King closed in the 1920s. Another mine, the Sunnyside, was close by. To see if the Sunnyside had gold, a company drilled a huge tunnel into the mountain.

Big Tunnel Funnelled Poisons Into Water

The American Tunnel, as it was called, collected water from Sunnyside mine, and possibly from other mines. Then it dumped the poisoned water into a creek.

The Sunnyside mine was closed in 1991. Company officials sealed the hole with a concrete plug the size of a railway car. A similar plug was used at Gold King.

Polluted water continued to seep out of the mine. For years, that seemed to be the end of the story.

Mine Owners Blame Each Other, EPA

Now, the owners of Gold King and Sunnyside blame each other. They also both blame the EPA.

Todd Hennis, who owns the Gold King Mine, said Sunnyside is responsible for the water.

"I believe Sunnyside knew it was going to happen," Hennis said. They did not take any action "because it will cost them money to fix it," he said.

Kinross Gold Corporation now owns the Sunnyside. The mining company denied that it was responsible for the spill.

"It (the plug) did not cause the water buildup at Gold King," Kinross said.

Officials Do Not Know If Mines Are Connected

No one has actually been in the closed mines. The EPA officials and mine experts say that right now it is impossible to know if the mines are connected. If they are connected, the experts are not sure how that happened. It might have been caused by cracks in the rock or later holes drilled to look for gold and silver.

Since the spill, local people have complained that the EPA ignored warnings about dangerous mine water. They also say the EPA either did not give them clear answers to their questions. Sometimes, they got no answers at all.