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EPA HEADING EFFORT: Mine cleanup has good start

Scientists' knowledge about site grows

By MARY THOMPSON

TAHOE DAILY TRIBUNE

MARKLEEVILLE, Calif. -- In its first cleanup season since earning Superfund status, the old Leviathan Mine and its stew of toxic materials has taught scientists much about the work that could take decades or even centuries to complete.

"We've learned a lot and that is exactly what we are supposed to be doing in these early stages," said Kevin Mayer of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "But this is a long-term program and there's going to be activity up there for decades, if not centuries."

Most of the summer's gains were related to water quality and treatment, information that will help the EPA, the lead agency in the Superfund process, to direct future plans for restoration, Mayer added.

Leviathan Mine, which has been dormant for almost four decades, has leached harmful sulfuric acid into nearby Bryant and Leviathan creeks. The two creeks ramble through

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national forest land and join eight miles downstream with the East Fork of the Carson River, a major northern Nevada tributary that is used for agriculture and recreation.

The water tests at an acid level equivalent to lemon juice. It also contains other harmful metals such as arsenic, copper and zinc.

Efforts to restore water quality in Bryant and Leviathan creeks were started in the 1980s by the California Regional Water Quality Control Board. Since then, the state agency has been collecting runoff and allowing the water to evaporate, leaving behind the acid and metals.

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Last year, the regional board began treating the water with lime, a substance with a high alkalinity, to balance acid levels.

"I'm pleased with what the state is doing; however, what they are doing is ad hoc," Mayer said. "It's facing an existing problem and dealing with it the best they can for this year, but it's not necessarily the best way of dealing with the problems in the long run."

Superfund status, which was granted to the Leviathan Mine in May, will bring a long-term plan and federal attention to the 200-acre site.

The site, southeast of here, includes a 50-acre open pit mine and two areas of waste-rock debris. Water coming through the open pit area is already being treated and released back into the creek. Two 20-ton waste rock piles will be addressed through the EPA's plan.

"That waste rock is like two big tea bags of contamination," Mayer said. "We need to start working on

those other sources that are not captured in the pond system -- that will be an immediate focus, as well as pulling together information for long-term cleanup systems."

A damage assessment report, scheduled to be completed in the next six months, is being compiled by the U.S. Wildlife Service.

Initial reports have shown that only hardy bacteria have managed to survive in the waterway between the mine site and the East Fork of the Carson, eight miles downstream. Trout have been spotted in Bryant Creek but aren't expected to live in the acidic waters for long, said U.S. Wildlife biologist Dan Welsh.

"We'll be looking at a number of things concerning the affect the mine releases have had on the fish and other aquatic life in Bryant Creek and the East Fork of the Carson River," Welsh said. "We're there to give input for appropriate standards."

The Superfund status will also bring accountability to the cleanup efforts, which have been handed off by Arco Environmental Group, the oil giant that used to own the contaminated land.

Arco, even though it was relieved of liability when it turned the property over to the California Regional Board in the 1980s, will carry most of the responsibility in the Superfund cleanup, which is expected to run in the tens of millions of dollars.

"Arco has agreed to do a certain amount of the work and we're at the point right now where we are formalizing that," Mayer said.

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