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Officials try to get at Leviathan pollution sources

Andy Bourelle
RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL
5/28/2002 10:28 pm

Cleanup workers at the polluted Leviathan Mine hope this summer to be able to capture all the sources of toxic soup pouring into nearby streams and treat the contaminated runoff, a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official said Tuesday.

While officials have made substantial progress in recent years at the abandoned Sierra sulfur mine, they have never before been able to stop all of the acid mine drainage – a mixture of sulfuric acid and dissolved metals – from reaching nearby waterways, said Kevin Mayer, EPA project manager.

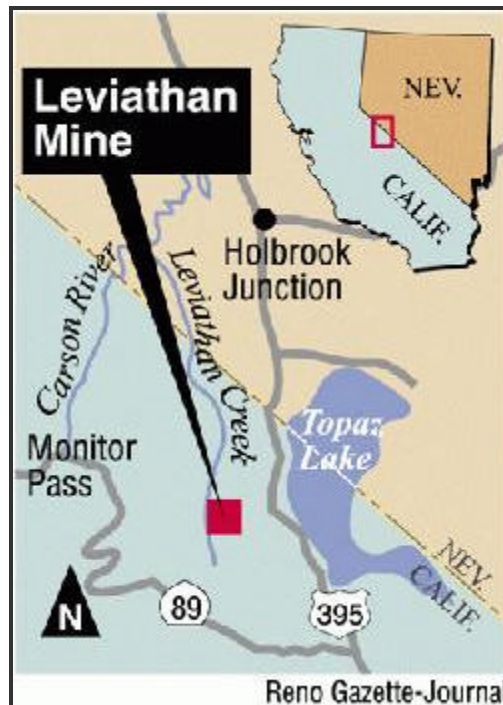
"That's our goal for the summer," Mayer said Tuesday from the EPA's San Francisco office. "We want to have nearly all, if not all, of the known sources intercepted and, ideally, intercepted through the winter."

Located 25 miles southwest of Gardnerville in the mountains of Alpine County, the Leviathan Mine for years has been leaking toxic runoff into creeks, discoloring them and rendering portions of the tributaries unable to sustain aquatic life.

Leviathan and Aspen creeks touch the mine directly and feed into Bryant Creek, which, after 7.8 miles, feeds into the East Fork of the Carson River.

The pollution has long worried downstream users, such as the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California, as well as Douglas County leaders.

After lobbying from Douglas and Alpine counties, the Carson Water Subconservancy District and the Washoe Tribe, the EPA in May 2000 declared the mine a Superfund site, classifying it among the nation's most hazardous waste sites.



For more information:

What: Leviathan Mine community meeting
When: 6 to 9 p.m. Thursday
Where: Dresslerville Gymnasium, Dresslerville Indian Colony, Dresslerville Road
Details: (510) 622-4490



Since then, the California water quality control board, University of Nevada, and Atlantic Richfield Co., a former owner of the mine, have made progress treating the drainage.

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Last year was particularly successful because the unusually dry weather created less runoff, giving officials a chance to get caught up on toxic liquid long stored at the site, Mayer said. Plus, an experimental treatment system developed by the University of Nevada -- one of three methods used at the site -- was able to run all winter long for the first time.

Officials are hopeful another of the methods, using lime to neutralize the acid, also can be used next winter, Mayer said.

"For the short-term, things are going well," Mayer said. "What's going to become a real challenge is defining what our long-term goals are at the site."

The first step of that, Mayer said, is a draft Leviathan Mine Public Health Assessment for which the California Department of Health Services is collecting comments.

Responses to the report, as well as those gleaned from a public meeting slated for Thursday evening in Dresslerville, are supposed to help officials come up with a long-term plan.

"One of the things we need to know about the site is how people use the water," Mayer said, "if they are fishing up there and how often; if there are people camping up there. If you go hiking in the area, would you really put a water filter in the creek and fill up your water bottle? Maybe not now, but maybe when it starts looking better. That makes a difference in how clean the water ought to be."

The public-comment period is open until June 4, said Jay LaPlante, community-relations specialist for the California agency. The final draft, including public input, is scheduled for completion this summer.

Thursday's meeting is the only one on the health assessment.

"We just hope people will come out and tell us what they think," LaPlante said.

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