

Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 15, 2005
RWB 05-002

Contact: Chuck Curtis
(530) 542-5460

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE--The Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board treated an unprecedented 10.5 million gallons of acid mine drainage at the Leviathan Mine Superfund Site in Alpine County this year.

Heavy winter snows and high groundwater flows of the metal- and arsenic-laden water threatened to cause the storage/evaporation ponds at the site to overflow this spring. If overflow had occurred, the untreated water would have destroyed aquatic life in Leviathan Creek and would have affected the downstream waters.

Leviathan Mine is an abandoned sulfur mine five miles east of Markleeville and six miles west of Topaz Lake, Nevada. The State of California acquired the mine in 1984 to clean up water quality problems caused by historic mining. The Water Board completed a pollution abatement project at the mine in 1985, and since 1999 has continued to actively treat acidic waters discharged from the mine site.

Acid mine drainage is low pH (high acid) water containing dissolved toxic metals. Acid mine drainage is collected and stored in five lined evaporation ponds at the site. Treating the acidic water helps prevent the ponds from overflowing into Leviathan Creek, a tributary to the East Fork of the Carson River, by increasing the storage capacity in the ponds. Due to the mine's remote mountain location, treatment operations are limited to the summer and fall. The Water Board was able to treat all of the contaminated water in the ponds.

"Preventing overflows of acid mine drainage from the ponds at Leviathan Mine is critical to California's efforts to restore Leviathan Creek. In treating nearly 11 million gallons of acid mine drainage, we prevented overflow this year and have reduced the possibility of overflow next year. Given that only five million gallons of treatment was contracted for at the start of this summer, it is extraordinary that we were able to get the job done," said Harold Singer, executive officer of the Lahontan Water Board.

The volume treated this year was nearly double that of any previous year. To prevent the ponds from overflowing, the Water Board conducted an emergency batch treatment in June, successfully treating and discharging 530,000 gallons from one of the ponds. In August, treatment of the water in the other ponds began. In September, the normal pond water treatment process was modified to increase treatment rate so that all of the water could be treated prior to the onset of winter. Water discharged from the treatment system met water quality criteria set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The Lahontan Water Board protects and restores water quality east of the Cascade and Sierra Nevada crests from the Oregon border through the Mojave Desert.