

FEATURED

Cleaner watershed

Projects divert heavy metal from Uncompahgre

By Katharhynn Heidelberg Montrose Daily Press Senior Writer Oct 22, 2015

Two abandoned mines in the Uncompahgre watershed are no longer leaking heavy metals into the waterways, after successful mediation projects.

The Uncompahgre Valley Watershed Partnership, with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the Colorado Division of Reclamation and Mining and Safety's Jeff Litteral, recently wrapped up remediation of the Michael Breen Mine, which was begun last October.

The Ouray-based nonprofit partnership also has remediated the Vernon Mine.

The CDPHE provided funding for the remediation projects at three legacy mine sites in the Upper Uncompahgre Watershed to address metals loading and acidic drainage into streams.

These waters are listed under the federal Clean Water Act as impaired.

"Loading from abandoned mines and natural processes results in overall poor water quality in the Upper Uncompahgre Watershed, (the headwaters to Ridgway Reservoir)," an Oct. 2 progress report states.

At the Breen Mine, drainage from a collapsed mine entrance flowed across a pile of waste rock, which caused cadmium, copper, zinc and manganese to leach to the Uncompahgre just below the mine site and Engineer Pass Road.

Workers, at times assisted by volunteers, rerouted the discharge by building a diversion ditch in October 2014. In August, an acre adjacent to the ditch was re-seeded, with the help of Chris Peltz of Research Services, LLC in Silverton.

The Vernon Mine contains two draining entrances that also flowed over waste rock on the way into Gray Copper Gulch. This was leaching "significant amounts" of copper into the stream.

Gray Copper Gulch is on the Clean Water Act list for copper and on the state's monitoring and evaluation list for iron and low PH.

Last month, crews hauled about 1,000 cubic yards of waste rock away from the drainage areas. They also closed off two mine entrances and built a diversion ditch to redirect drainage.

Some re-vegetation was also completed, using a native seed mix and straw bales for stabilization.

"For those areas, the heavy metal from the mines would continue to get into the stream flows and increase the heavy metal contamination" had nothing been done, UWP spokeswoman Tanya Ishikawa said Wednesday.

The contaminants kill aquatic life and affect other uses.

The remediation projects overall help promote clean waterways, which are vital to the state.

“Colorado is such a dry state to begin with. Everyone who relies on the water sources from Colorado, even downstream on the Colorado River, has a high demand for water,” Ishikawa said.

“Therefore, anything we can do to make more of our water clean and for multiple uses, the better we’ll be.”

The projects wound down as public interest in mine waste went up, in wake of the Gold King Mine spill that dumped contaminants into Cement Creek and the Animas River, creating an environmental disaster in August.

Contractors working for the Environmental Protection Agency hit a plug at the mine, sending 3 million gallons of wastewater into the Animas, and later the San Juan River. That spill created significant problems for drinking and agricultural water, and prompted heavy congressional criticism.

The Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership’s upcoming project in 2016 will tackle the Atlas Mill off Camp Bird Road, above Sneffles Creek.

Per the Oct. 2 report, mine tailings have been deposited in the creek’s floodplain and during spring runoff season, erosion sends heavy metals flowing into the stream, which is also listed for cadmium and zinc and does not support aquatic life.

The partnership is working with Ouray Silver Mine, Inc., which owns the property, and consulting with Western Stream Works LLC to minimize erosion.

The proposal includes routing the creek away from the tailings, stabilizing the channel with boulders or logs and vegetating affected areas to increase stabilization, as well as to provide riparian cover, the Oct. 2 report says.

This project is slated to begin next summer.

###