

# Toxic spill is a calamity for the Colorado tourist town of Silverton

By NIGEL DUARA AUG 14, 2015 | 4:00 AM | SILVERTON, COLO.



Wastewater from a closed gold mine poured into Cement Creek in Silverton, Colo., on Aug. 5. The creek feeds into the Animas River. (Theo Stroomer / Getty Images)

Before a hushed City Council at the town hall, the man who accidentally unleashed poisons from the earth explained how it all happened.

His name is Hayes Griswold, a 28-year veteran of the Environmental Protection Agency, and on Aug. 5, he and a small crew were working on a defunct gold mine near Silverton called the Gold King.

According to a transcript of the Monday meeting reviewed by the Los Angeles Times, the plan was to do some minor excavation work and insert a pipe as part of a cleanup effort. Griswold used a backhoe to dig into the material in front of him, but, he told the assembled council members, he pulled too much "unconsolidated material" from the ceiling of the mine's mouth.

He spotted a small trickle of clean water. His experience told him one thing: run.

He knew that if water were pushing its way through the small excavation he had done, there was much more pressure behind the walls than he and the rest of his crew first believed. The giant concrete "plug" that closes a mine was about to give way.

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"We blew out unconsolidated material, which blew the plug," Griswold said.

It's unclear how long it took, but soon enough, a wall of orange water 20 feet high exploded from the open mine's mouth. Wastewater treatment ponds where pollutants settle were overwhelmed.

And that, in short, is how arsenic, cadmium, lead, aluminum and copper ended up in Cement Creek and then the Animas River, initially flowing at 5 mph on its way toward New Mexico and Utah. It's unknown how long the cleanup will take or how much it will cost. The EPA, which says the river is returning to normal levels, has assumed full responsibility.

"We don't have experience with this type of river," said EPA Region 8 Assistant Regional Administrator Martin Hestmark at the council meeting.

And now the small summer tourist town in the San Juan Mountains is under siege. For decades, its residents have lived next to a ticking time bomb, as water accumulated in a major pipe underneath the earth. The pipe was built under the mines on Bonita Mountain, including the Gold King Mine, to help extract ore and was eventually sealed off. Water began to build up in the pipe till it burst out last week.

In Silverton, full-time residents amount to about 500 people, on mostly packed-dirt roads in the small, rural community.

"It's the real 'Northern Exposure' up here," said Mark Esper, editor of the Silverton Standard & the Miner newspaper.

The knowledge that rising water levels in the pipe could have a catastrophic effect on Silverton and cities downstream — including Durango, Colo., and Farmington, N.M. — has been a given here.

The town takes particular pride in its drinking water, which comes straight from the Rockies.

"We laugh at tourists drinking bottled water here," said DeAnne Gallegos, director of the Silverton Chamber of Commerce. "We are where water is made."

The area is rugged, but that's part of the appeal. "It is an extreme soul who chooses to make this base camp," Gallegos said. "This is our home."

Thus, the disaster has struck at the three essential pillars that support Silverton's image of itself: its mining history, its pristine drinking water and its tourism dollars.

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On Thursday, the Cement Creek fed clear, blue water into the Animas River. A week earlier, this scene looked like someone dumped a truckload of Tang into the water supply.

Even before the spill, Cement Creek, which runs through the middle of Silverton, had long been regarded as wastewater.

"No one's recreating in Cement Creek if they know what's good for them," said San Juan County spokesman Anthony Edwards.

This is how it works: Water inside the mountains gets progressively more acidic as it draws off sulfide, which is the primary element in the San Juan Mountains.

A place like Cement Creek is a victim of such "loading" of heavy minerals. No fish live in Cement Creek. But when the creek merges into the larger Animas River, water quality improves and, downriver, the Animas is a favorite of anglers and kayakers.

But now the spill has locals wondering when the water will be clean again.

The images of toxic-laden water rushing south has done serious damage to this area, which fought an EPA designation as a Superfund hazardous-waste site, in part because of its impact on Silverton's image.

Now, Edwards said, the news has already resulted in some cancellations of hotel rooms in the future, though the full picture of the mine disaster's effect on tourism won't be clear for weeks, if not months.

Even as Gallegos tries to convince nervous callers that Silverton's drinking water is perfectly safe — its source is upriver from the spill site and wasn't affected — she knows she can provide all the facts she wants: For tourism, it's belief that matters.

The mine spill did play directly into one image this town maintains: that of a corrupt EPA that had designs on taking over the mines and their land as part of a larger federal government land grab.

"The government knew what they were doing when they caused that spill," said Doolie Smith, 46, a bartender at Avalanche Brewing in Silverton. "They've been radaring us and surveying this land for years, and now they get what they want."

For now, the town is hoping for a wet fall and a good snowpack, anything to get the minerals moving down the river, off its banks and out of its stream bed.

On Thursday, for the first time since the spill on the flat marsh where the Cement meets the Animas, it began to rain.

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