

Beneath the Numbers

Use the numbers handout to look beneath these numbers. What motives are behind these numbers? What questions would you want to ask before you believe these numbers represent reality?

1. But regardless of what actually caused the blowout, the Gold King Mine accident also calls attention to a much bigger problem that confronts Colorado and other western states. According to a 2011 report by the federal Government Accountability Office, there are at least 161,000 abandoned hardrock mine sites in 12 western states and Alaska. At least 33,000 of those are causing environmental problems, including contamination of surface water and groundwater. EPA also has estimated that mine drainage has contaminated 40 percent of western watersheds. In Colorado alone, state Department of Public Health and Environment officials told the Denver Post that 230 old mines have contaminated 1,645 miles of rivers and streams. And the problem could get worse. EPA estimated that the 161,000 sites had at least 332,000 features — an average of more than two per site — that raised the risk of an environmental mishap, such as unstable or decaying mine structures that might collapse and cause a toxic waste-water leak.

What's the agenda of this author in using these numbers?

What questions would you raise over these numbers?

2. To sort out these issues, it is necessary, first, to understand that most land has no value for mining. In 1995, for example, there were 330,112 active mining claims on record with the BLM. Assuming that all claims are 20 acres (the maximum claim allowed), there would be close to 7 million acres of BLM land staked under the Mining Law. This is less than two percent of total federal land holdings in the West.

Furthermore, little of this land will ever be mined. Even in Nevada, a major producer of hardrock minerals, less than one percent of the land has ever been mined (Nevada Mining Association 1997). For every ten promising sites, mining companies expect nine to be abandoned or tabled after preliminary sample drilling. Most of the current claims on record will not turn into mineral development projects any time soon.

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3. In 1920, Congress removed oil, natural gas and other minerals that could be used for fuel from the 1872 Mining Law. Instead, the government would lease the rights.

And in 1977, Congress decreed that miners of coal on federal land would have to pay a royalty of 8 to 12.5 percent, and clean up after themselves. The government in the past decade has collected \$11.08 billion from companies taking coal, oil, and natural gas, plus \$35.8 billion in rents, bonuses, royalties and escrow payments for offshore oil and gas reserves.

Still, hard-rock miners pay nothing for the gold, silver, platinum, copper and other minerals they get.

Walish, the manager of Cambior's Top of the World project, joins many in the mining industry in warning, "If massive royalties are put on federal land, you're going to see a lot less mining."

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