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## Economic future in flux after Gold King spill

Local officials speak at D.C. hearing

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Photo by:  
Blake

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By [Peter Marcus](#) Herald staff writer

DENVER – The economic stability of Southwest Colorado could be in peril, according to financial victims of the Gold King Mine spill, who spoke in Washington, D.C., on Thursday.

The three speakers – representing La Plata County, Durango and Silverton interests – spoke at a hearing before the U.S. Senate Small Business and Entrepreneurship Committee. Only two senators attended, both from Colorado: Cory Gardner, a Republican, and Michael Bennet, a Democrat.

The speakers said victims of the spill – which was caused by an Environmental Protection Agency-contracted team – still have not received payments for damage claims filed, adding that no timeline has been set.

The EPA was invited to the hearing but declined to send someone.

La Plata County Commissioner Brad Blake, a Republican, said the fear is what's to come. He pointed to widespread international media accounts of the incident, during which an estimated 3 million gallons of orange mining sludge poured into the Animas River on Aug. 5.

“When tourism-related businesses are impacted, there is a ripple effect throughout our economy,” Blake said.

The Durango Area Tourism Office conducted a media analysis revealing that 19 million media impressions were made between Aug. 5 and Aug. 24. Blake held up an edition of The Durango Herald to highlight the catastrophic media images of a river turned orange.

The small historic mining town of Silverton depends on tourism. After the last mine shutdown in the early 1990s, tourism kept the town afloat. Forty-eight percent of Silverton's economy is based on tourism.

“We are there to welcome the influx of hundreds of thousands of tourists who come to experience us,” said DeAnne Gallego, executive director of the Silverton Area Chamber of Commerce. “We are dependent on that, thankful for that, and understand that without that, we could have the potential of being one more ghost town.”

Water-sport companies along the Animas and throughout Durango were impacted the most. Authorities closed the river for eight days following the incident, during a critical summer period.

Overall, business went from being up 9.8 percent to being down 23 percent for rafting companies, said Andy Corra, owner of 4Corners Riversports in Durango. His business alone lost about \$19,000, he said. Losses for companies were reported as high as \$100,000.

Hotels also may lose business as a result of the spill. While authorities filled rooms during the initial response, they did not pay a lodgers tax. If tourism slows, then hotels also will grapple with lost revenue.

There also have been expenses for La Plata County, which has so far spent about \$200,000 on the incident. The EPA has promised to reimburse the county, but so far, no payments have been received.

“From the farmers to the real estate offices ... people are nervous about this,” Blake said. “It really worries them.”

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