

This is a printer friendly version of an article from **DurangoHerald.com**

To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Article published Sep 6, 2015

Partnership, broad scope needed for mine cleanup

When the now infamous photo of three kayakers paddling in an other-worldly orange-yellow Animas River flooded the media on Aug. 6, it was the first time most Americans had ever given any thought to mine waste.

It was an ironic 21st century version of a gold rush: shocking, horrifying and disgusting.

For those of us who live in Southwest Colorado though, dealing with the legacy of 19th and 20th century hard-rock mining has been a difficult, expensive and intractable challenge for decades.

While the accidental 3-million-gallon spill from the Gold King Mine was the most dramatic example of the problem, runoff from old mining operations combined with minerals from the iron-rich soil of the area has been turning Cement Creek orange-yellow every spring for as long as people here can remember.

But unlike an oil spill or a plume of pollution from an active chemical plant, it's tough to find anyone to take responsibility when a long-idled mine is leaking runoff contaminated with toxic chemicals and heavy metals, so the problem has fallen to the community to address.

In 1994, after water-quality concerns caught the attention of Colorado's Water Quality Control Division, and the Environmental Protection Agency proposed designating the region a Superfund site, the Animas River Stakeholders Group was formed with a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to develop local consensus on remediation efforts and get the work done.

The group includes representatives from mining companies, environmental organizations, local landowners, government officials, and state and federal agencies, including the EPA. All of the affected communities from Silverton to the downstream cities along the Animas and San Juan rivers have worked together in an attempt to mitigate the widespread mine pollution problem.

In the past 21 years, the group has monitored 400 abandoned mine sites, assembled research data and completed 17 remediation projects in the area, including removal of mine tailings ponds, control of mine discharge and installation of treatment facilities.

Still, the mines keep leaking; there are simply too many, and there is not enough funding to address the problems.

Now, in the aftermath of the Gold King Mine spill, some are again calling for designating the Upper Animas River Basin a Superfund site. To many, this appears to be the only way to

secure the necessary funding, expertise and regulatory clout to deal with the mess.

For others, the stigma associated with Superfund designation would level a crushing blow to the delicate local economy, which long ago traded mining for tourism as a way of life.

We want to make it clear that all options – including Superfund designation – are on the table and are open for discussion. We cannot overlook any potential solution.

Whatever the ultimate answer, we need a permanent solution to the mine-waste issues. We need to begin a regional conversation immediately. The affected communities – from Silverton to La Plata County, the Southern Ute Indian Reservation, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Tribe, New Mexico, Utah and beyond – must determine how best to protect the Animas River Basin for current and future generations.

Mining companies and investors, landowners, downstream water users, environmental advocates, and local, state and federal government officials need to work together to ensure the problems are addressed. We have to confront long-ignored impediments, such as the antiquated 1872 federal mining law, liability issues for organizations that attempt cleanup operations, state policies, local concerns and, most of all, financing for the costly work necessary to stop the mines from leaking once and for all.

This cannot be accomplished in mere weeks or months. The damage done in more than 100 years of hard-rock mining will require years of effort to remove tailings ponds and find permanent solutions to the problems of toxic runoff from open abandoned mines.

Americans take pride in the audacious, entrepreneurial, hard-scrabble history of the Gold Rush that brought dreamers with picks and shovels and sticks of dynamite to the rugged West. They came from all over the world. They put down roots and created vibrant towns in an exquisitely beautiful place.

Now, what this exquisite place needs is a gold rush of commitment to solving the problems they left behind.

Gwen Lachelt is a La Plata County commissioner. Reach her at gwenlachelt@gmail.com. Ernest Kuhlman is chairman of the San Juan County Board of Commissioners. Reach him at (970) 387-5444. Christine M. Tookey is mayor of Silverton. Reach her at chris@frontier.net.
