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Stakeholders have long record of success

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The recent Animas River Stakeholders Group meeting in Silverton was generally non-corrosive, thoughtful and calm – unlike some accounts portrayed it.



True, the notion of a Superfund designation was not given consensual support, but then the conversation has just been renewed. Many newly interested residents expressed the need for solid, unbiased information based on science, existing regulations and experience. ARSG is dedicated to providing this information to broaden community awareness, develop environmental stewardship and provide a forum to influence decision-making.

The Silverton community has long supported the ARSG's numerous mine reclamation projects as has myriad collaborating local, state and federal agencies. So why bash Silverton? It has its own pristine drinking water sources and has no need for irrigation water because there is no agriculture within the county. Yet its residents have led the effort to remediate the mining legacy of pollution for more

than 21 years. With the exception of the significant support provided to these efforts by the Southwestern Water Conservation District, the downstream residents and political entities that actually use the water have provided no funding and little interest – until now.

The ARSG has received regional and national awards for its accomplishments in remediation. In spite of those predicting failure, ARSG has been effective in reducing zinc and copper concentration by 70 percent in Mineral Creek and a smaller but significant reduction has been reached in the Upper Animas above Silverton. The ARSG focus has been to improve water quality and aquatic habitats throughout the Animas watershed by reducing pollution from abandoned mine sites.

New discharges caused by a mine under active permit in the Gladstone vicinity of Cement Creek have effectively overwhelmed our gains, but that does not reflect on our abilities – rather on the questionable abandonment of a discharge permit by a regulatory agency. While it was never the intent of the ARSG to deal with permitted mines – because regulatory agencies exist for that purpose – it is only after the permit was abandoned that the ARSG chose to search for a viable treatment solution for these newly discharging mines. Because of the liability issues related to mine discharge, the ARSG invited the Superfund arm of the EPA in to characterize the new pollution sources. The EPA has always been a major participant as a stakeholder.

Recently, the ARSG, the EPA and Sunnyside Gold Corp. have worked together to

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produce several reports on potential treatment scenarios, cost analyses, potential operators and funding sources. Plus, we are encouraging and collaborating with several inventors who have new technologies that could result in major cost savings in a long-term treatment facility. Nevertheless, for their role in leading the nation in mine site remediation, Silverton residents have recently been portrayed as obstructionist, selfish, obstinate and greedy – and that the ARSG “piecemeal” approach has “failed.” However, the EPA has rightfully taken responsibility for the only failure of which I am aware.

Silverton comprises people who toiled in the mines – not owned them. Most of their paychecks went south to Durango for commodities, equipment, transportation, milling, smelting and entertainment, while profits were dispersed (unevenly) throughout the nation. And who benefited from the metals produced if not the citizens of this nation? It is time we all realize our role in this legacy of pollution! It is unfortunate that Durango, La Plata County and the communities and tribal nations south have offered little help. But with renewed concern and participation in a process that is based on science, collaboration and goodwill we have the opportunity to become a part of the solution.

Whether the money for cleanup comes from Superfund action or directly from Congress, the source is the same: tax dollars. Superfund has not been reauthorized, so the collection of a surtax on the chemical, oil and gas industries has been suspended. A collaboration of government and mining companies could result in treatment designed and constructed by experts. Mining companies are now, at last, used to meeting and exceeding strict water-quality and aquatic-life standards. The alternative, Superfund, may or may not result in some compensation from mining companies, but only after lengthy and costly litigation which, of necessity, can exclude the public from participation and frequently slows construction significantly. These and other options need to be thoroughly explored before decisions are made.

In the meantime, please quit bashing the members of our community and the organization that has an established record of success in mine site remediation.

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