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Water-treatment system announced for Gold King

EPA building temporary facility to treat polluted water



Photo by: Brennan Linsley/Associated Press file photo

Water flows through a series of retention ponds built to contain and filter out heavy metals and chemicals from runoff coming from the Gold King Mine. The Environmental Protection Agency announced Wednesday it will fund a temporary water-treatment plant at Gold King Mine, eliminating the need for the retention ponds.

By [Peter Marcus](#) Herald staff writer

DENVER – The Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday announced it will build a temporary water-treatment system in the wake of the Gold King Mine spill.

The \$1.78-million portable treatment facility will be located in Gladstone, according to EPA officials. It will be operational by Oct. 14 and operate during the coming winter. The contract provides for 42 weeks of treatment, with the option to start or stop treatment as needed.

The announcement comes as the EPA continues to deal with cleansing water from the Gold King Mine disaster, in which an estimated 3 million gallons of orange mining sludge poured into the Animas River on Aug. 5.

The EPA has acknowledged fault in the incident. While performing restoration work at the mine, an EPA-contracted team inadvertently released the polluted water during excavation. Initial tests showed spikes in heavy metals, including lead, arsenic and cadmium.

Water continues to flow from the mine at approximately 550 gallons per minute. Without the plant, officials have had to rely on a series of settling ponds to capture the dirty water before being discharged to Cement Creek.

Authorities constructed four ponds at the mine site, which are treating water to remove as much metal loading as possible. The treatment plant will replace the ponds.

EPA officials estimate the plant will cost \$20,000 per week to operate, with another \$53,200 for demobilization and bonding. EPA will use money from its Superfund coffers to pay for the project. Superfund money is used to clean up blighted areas that could be toxic to humans. Gold King still has not officially been listed as a Superfund site.

The bidding process for the plant was conducted by St. Louis-based Environmental Restoration, LLC, the contractor that was working with the EPA when the spill occurred. The treatment-system contract was awarded to subcontractor Alexco Environmental Group Inc., which has an office in Denver.

Officials said the transition to the plant is necessary as winter temperatures at high elevations can reach well below zero, making it unsafe to manually treat water at the mine site. The system is designed to handle up to 1,200 gallons per minute.

“The objective of the treatment system is to neutralize the mine discharge and remove solids and metals,” stated an EPA news release announcing the facility. “Although the Gold King Mine discharge is just one of many into Cement Creek, the treatment will remove a portion of the metal loading to Cement Creek.”

Though the system is temporary, long-term treatment will be decided after further evaluation of mine discharge, said an EPA spokeswoman.

Colorado U.S. Sens. Michael Bennet, a Democrat, and Cory Gardner, a Republican, on Tuesday sent a letter to the EPA calling for the construction of a permanent water treatment plant in the Upper Animas River watershed.

“Legacy mine pollution is a serious, long-standing problem across the West,” the senators wrote to EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy. “We recognize that the EPA was attempting to address these issues when they triggered the blowout. However, as communities in Southwest Colorado look to move forward in the wake of this disaster, they need reassurance that the party responsible for the blowout now has a long-term plan to restore the watershed.”

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