



August 12, 2015, Photo of wastewater from the Gold King Mine.

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2015 GOLD KING MINE SPILL

## **Feds to pay Colorado \$5 million**

“It’s a drop in the bucket,” says chairman of Bonita Peak Mining District Community Advisory Group

By Conrad Swanson

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The federal government will pay Colorado \$5 million to clean contamination left behind by mines in southwest Colorado, particularly

from the 2015 Gold King Mine spill, which released a yellow plume of heavy metals into the Animas River, the state attorney general's office announced.

The Colorado Natural Resources Damages Trustees approved the settlement — the latest in a series of payouts following the spill — Thursday morning.

Federal liability in the contamination comes from the fact that U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials triggered the 3 million-gallon Gold King Mine spill. In addition, the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management manage other areas with mines that have also been the source of contamination in the area.

The \$5 million will go toward restoring areas damaged by the spill and other contamination left behind in the swath of southwest Colorado's San Juan County, state attorney general spokesman Lawrence Pacheco said in a release.

The area is so contaminated it's classified as a federal Superfund Site, a designation reserved for the country's most polluted areas.

"The damage to Southwestern Colorado natural resources remains a matter of great concern," state Attorney General Phil Weiser said in the release.

The settlement will set aside valuable money "to address these damages and invest in the restoration of natural resources in this part of the state," Weiser, who is also chairman of the state's Natural Resources Trustees, added.

The \$5 million likely will be pooled with other settlements made after the spill, Pacheco said in the release.

The Sunnyside Gold Corporation agreed in late 2021 to pay \$1.6 million for cleanup efforts. The company agreed earlier that year to pay \$10 million to the Navajo Nation and an additional \$11 million to the state of New Mexico. From southwest Colorado, the Animas River flows south into New Mexico and through Navajo territory.

The mining company and its corporate owner — the Kinross Gold Corporation, based in Canada — also agreed last year to pay an additional \$40.1 million to the federal government and \$4 million to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment for additional cleanup efforts.

In that 2022 settlement, the federal government agreed to kick in \$45 million.

While the seven-figure settlements do add up, the latest \$5 million doesn't amount to much compared with the estimated cleanup costs, said Peter Butler, leader of the Bonita Peak Mining District Community Advisory Group.

Butler estimated that cleanup costs in the area could total \$300 million, although he acknowledged much of the money goes toward attorney fees and documenting the damage rather than physical cleanup.

“It's a drop in the bucket,” Butler said of the \$5 million. But, he added, it's still a positive step.

A cleanup crew led by EPA officials inadvertently triggered the Gold King Mine spill.

The Denver Post reported after the incident that the agency official overseeing the work knew of the blowout danger beforehand.

The blowout sent at least 880,000 pounds of heavy metals into the Animas River, across three states and the land of two Native American tribes, turning the water a bright orange and raising concerns for aquatic wildlife and farmers downstream.