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Sunnyside: Study shows Animas target met

BONITA PEAK MINING DISTRICT SUPERFUND SITE

But EPA says it's not so simple, and SGC is not off the hook

Sunnyside Gold Corp. is pointing to a new study showing water quality in the Animas River meeting targets set by the state of Colorado and the local Citizens Superfund Workgroup.

And they say that's because of the combination of water treatment, bulkheading and remediation.

"The data conclusively demonstrate that SGC's bulkheading and remediation, combined with the water treatment plant, have improved water quality levels so it meets targets set by the State

of Colorado and the local Citizens Superfund Workgroup," said Kevin Roach, reclamation manager for Sunnyside Gold.

Sunnyside says the new data, which was compiled and analyzed by Steven Lange of the engineering firm Knight Piésold, shows metals loading in the Animas

River is today at near historically low levels.

"I believe that these findings are extremely noteworthy and great news for the Animas," Roach said. "It conclusively shows that SGC's bulkheading and remediation has been successful and has improved water quality in the river. It also shows that the

Citizen Superfund Workgroup's priority of improving water quality to levels documented in 1999-2003 has been met."

Roach added that this "upends EPA's understanding of water quality issues in the area."

But that's not the way the EPA sees it. "Sunnyside Gold's report does not

change EPA's understanding of water quality issues in the Bonita Peak Mining District, nor does it change the determination that SGC is responsible for degradation of water quality in Cement Creek," said EPA media officer Richard Mylott.

Mylott said that the existing data show that loading from Cement Creek drastically increased after water treatment ceased in 2004.

"In fact, the analysis by Sunnyside Gold's consultant shows that concentrations and loading from Cement Creek were much higher from 2005 until EPA constructed the interim water treatment plant (IWTP) in 2015," Mylott said.

Mylott also asserted that the water quality objectives of the 1996 Consent Decree between Sunnyside Gold and the State of Colorado were intended to maintain water quality in the Animas River at a reference point below Silverton.

"Maintaining water quality at the time of the agreement was not a risk-based decision and was not based on state water quality standards," Mylott said. "EPA is obligated to address risk under Superfund and therefore may have different goals than those identified under the 1996 Consent Decree."

Peter Butler, facilitator of the Animas River Stakeholders Group, said he's "cautiously optimistic" about improved water quality in the upper Animas.

"This past year has had very little precipitation. I'd like to see if the trend holds over the next year or two, especially if we have a more normal snowpack," Butler said. "The time period between 2001-2004 were also low-snow-pack years."

seems to show that the current treatment plant at Gladstone is probably having a bigger impact than initially thought. We've always thought that Sunnyside's treatment plant had a major positive impact when it was operating."

In September 2016, the EPA officially listed 48 mining-related sites in San Juan County as the Bonita Peak Mining District Superfund Site.

That action came a year after the Aug. 5, 2015 Gold King Mine spill, when millions of gallons of acidic, metals-laden water was accidentally released from the Gold King's #7 portal by an EPA contractor, triggering emergency responses in four states.