

ARCO pays for mine cleanup, conservation

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By Environmental News Network

Petroleum products giant ARCO has paid \$720,000 to purchase a 480-acre conservation area in the Bald Mountain Range in Sierra County, Calif.

The purchase is part of a settlement between the company and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) over a breached 1998 agreement to treat contaminated drainage from the Leviathan Mine Superfund Site.

The Washoe Tribe will hold the property title for the private land on Babbitt Ridge, which is surrounded on all sides by the Tahoe and Toiyabe national forests.

The purchase by ARCO, the successor to the former mine operator, resolves its liability for failing to prevent ponds of acid mine drainage from spilling over and contaminating the Carson River watershed during the winter of 1998.



Photo by Stephen Lawrence / Courtesy U.S. Geological Survey
The East Fork Carson River, downstream from the Leviathan Mine, has been contaminated by acid mine runoff.

ARCO also contributed to a Nature Conservancy fund for the costs of administering a conservation easement that will forever guarantee the land's protection.

"This settlement will protect an intact portion of the ecosystem damaged by past activities at Leviathan Mine," said Keith Takata, director of the EPA's Superfund division in San Francisco. "We have great confidence that the Washoe Tribe and the Nature Conservancy will serve as model stewards of this pristine property on Babbitt Ridge. The Washoe have been tremendous advocates for the conservation and restoration of their ancestral lands in the eastern Sierra."

The Washoe Tribe plans to operate an education center on the property each summer to teach

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Washoe children about their traditional culture and its relationship to the environment.

Cleanup efforts have removed the immediate threat of the Leviathan Mine, the EPA said. For the past 40 years, acid mine drainage from the site has killed off aquatic life in Leviathan and Bryant creeks downstream of the mine.

This year, for the third summer in a row, work crews drew treated acid mine drainage from five storage ponds on site that store up to 16 million gallons of acidic waste, preventing materials from tainting nearby Leviathan and Bryant creeks.

The East Fork Carson River, which is 10 miles downstream of the mine, has also been threatened by mine runoff. The local watersheds, along with other streams and lakes in the Eastern Sierra, served as historical habitat for the Lahontan cutthroat trout, a federally listed threatened species.

State and federal agencies have tried several approaches to clean up the site since the mid-1980s, but drainage from the site continues to pollute the streams.

This year, contractors hired by the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board treated the final 4 million gallons of concentrated acid left from previous years by pumping water out and adding controlled amounts of lime to neutralize the acid. The metals settled out of the water with the lime treatment solids.

The EPA is overseeing actions by ARCO to address other sources of Leviathan mine acid drainage for a long-term solution. ARCO and the University of Nevada have been developing several methods to continue treatment of the acid mine drainage year round, a challenge because the 7,000-foot-high site is inaccessible to heavy equipment during the long winters in the Sierra Nevada.

The EPA named the Leviathan Mine a federal Superfund site in May of 2000. The mine has not operated since 1962.

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