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Abandoned sulfur mine in Sierra proposed for Superfund site

RENO, Nev. (AP) - The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is proposing Superfund status for an abandoned sulfur mine that opened in the Sierra Nevada in the 1860s.

Citing significant health and environmental threats, EPA Regional Administrator Felicia Marcus notified tribal leaders and the governors of Nevada and California about her recommendation for the Leviathan Mine near Topaz Lake in Alpine County, Calif.

"We believe that an immediate threat to public health, welfare and environment exists at the site," Marcus said in her Feb. 4 letter.

The mine, located 25 miles southwest of Gardnerville, Nev., produced copper sulfate from 1863-72. It was used sporadically until it closed permanently in 1962.

Marcus is seeking input from the tribe and both states regarding the Superfund designation, which would make some federal money available to help with the clean up.

Despite years of efforts by California water quality officials and the EPA, polluted waters run rampant.

"It's a huge mess," Douglas County Commissioner Bernie Curtis told the Reno Gazette-Journal.

Curtis backs Superfund designation along with Brian Wallace, chairman of the Washoe Tribe. His tribe's reservation has been polluted by the mine.

"It's extremely serious," Wallace said.

Runoff laden with a toxic soup of heavy metals drains into Leviathan Creek and then into Bryant Creek, a tributary of the Carson River's east fork.

The creeks are a lifeless sewer of arsenic, mercury, copper, lead, zinc and other heavy metals.

On a recent visit, a Forest Service official said he saw pollution flowing into Leviathan Creek "like maple syrup.

"It's pretty nasty," said Gary Schiff, chief ranger for the Forest Service's Carson Ranger District.

"Whether it's a Superfund site or not, we need to make a better effort to clean this up. We're concerned. We need some activity."

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