

## **EPA, Chevron get set for the first round of cleanup projects**

**By Andy Dennison**

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QUESTA – Construction is expected to begin this month on the initial phase of contamination cleanup at the Chevron Mining molybdenum mining facility.

The start of work at five sites within the property of the former Molycorp mine signals the beginning of a long process of removing or controlling contaminants caused by nearly 100 years of mining activities at the mine and mill in the Red River canyon, and the waste ponds above the village of Questa. These first-phase projects are designed to address exposure to PCB-contaminated soils, the condition of wildlife along the Red River, and ecological risk of sediments in Eagle Rock Lake, according to information from the Environmental Protection Agency.

The first round of work is expected to last for two years. MTC of Questa, formerly Mascarenas Trucking Company, will be handling the bulk of the project that is mostly earth moving. Chevron's project manager Mike Coats told

*The Taos News* that MTC was one of three local companies considered for the job but the only one that could dedicate its workforce for a two-year commitment. MTC also installed a solar array for Chevron in Questa.

MTC is expected to have 15-20 employees on the job, Coats said, and Chevron has "encouraged" MTC to hire local workers whenever they can. MTC workers recently began safety training from Chevron officials, Coats said.

"We also wanted to be sure they were fully employed so that there would always be enough workers to do the job at all times," Coats said during an open house at the Questa Ranger Station Tuesday (June 5). "Because we chose to have one company do all the work, the project will be phased."

In the first phase, expected to begin this month, a new remote-controlled headgate will go in where the Red River is diverted into Eagle Rock Lake. Sensors in the headgate will detect when storm water is carrying too much sediment down the inlet channel and into Eagle Rock Lake, and alert officials to close the gate remotely. That project is expected to take two weeks, according to Laura Stankosky, EPA's project manager.

"We wanted to get the headgate in first to be sure it works, because it's critical to the overall Eagle Rock Lake cleanup," Stankosky said.

Also slated to begin this summer is the removal of PCB-contaminated soils from Chevron's mill at the mine site. Sampling indicates concentrations of the banned toxic material in a small area

around the mill, the result of years of oil spilling from transformers, Stankosky said. That project is expected to begin in July and last three to four months, she said. The waste will be taken to a disposal site in Utah.

Once that job is completed, the EPA plan calls for construction of a pipeline to channel unused irrigation water through historic tailings dumps at the waste site in Questa. The so-called Eastern Diversion Channel will replace an earthberm acequia and allow irrigation water to run through the tailings area without picking up contaminants or migrating into groundwater, according to the EPA.

That project is expected to take three months, Stankosky said.

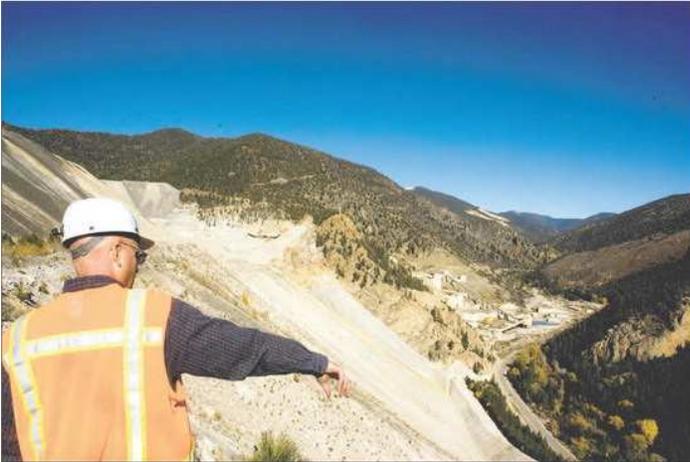
On the schedule for 2013 is a cleanup of old tailings spills along the pipeline that slurries waste rock from the mill to the tailings ponds. Historically, there have been numerous spills that have threatened the Red River's ecosystem. The spills will be hauled to the tailings ponds for disposal, Stankosky said.

Eagle Rock Lake will await dredging until at least 2013 while the EPA and Chevron figure out the best way to pull sediments off the lake's bottom. Options include a digging from a floating dredge, segregating portions of the lake for dredging or draining the entire lake, Coats said. Chevron and the EPA have said Eagle Rock Lake, a popular fishing location, will not be closed until the Carson National Forest has completed construction of a new dam at Cabresto Lake, the other popular lake-fishing site in the Questa area.

All of these actions were mandated in a Record of Decision issued by EPA in December 2010 for cleanup at the Superfund site. Chevron Mining, which foots the bill for the entire cleanup, and the EPA recently reached a negotiated agreement on the first projects. Looming, however, are the major portions of the cleanup process, including stabilizing the rock walls at the mine site, diverting acid-producing springs off the Red River, treating contaminated groundwater at a new treatment plant at the mine site and covering contaminated waste at the tailings facilities. EPA and Chevron have not reached a settlement on how and when those actions will be conducted.

Cost estimates range from \$500 million to \$800 million, and the cleanup process is expected to last a decade or more.

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**Chevron Mining project manager Mike Coats looks over waste rock piles at the Questa Superfund site during a tour last year.**