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Chevron Mine cleanup under way at mill site in Questa

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QUESTA — Cleanup to the Chevron (Molycorp) Mine, Inc. in Questa is under way.

The mine, which has been on the Environmental Protection Agency's National Superfund List since Sept. 16, 2011, is in the process of preliminary negotiations with the agency for some of the phases, but cleanup of the first phase has begun.

Fieldwork for the cleanup began in June, with cleanup beginning earlier in July.

The mine extracts molybdenum, which is an element primarily used to strengthen steel.

There are four phases the mine is to complete, according to the E.P.A.'s monthly report: removal of polychlorinated biphenyl-contaminated (P.C.B.) soil at the mill area with off-site treatment/ disposal, removal of historic tailing spill deposits along the Red River riparian corridor, removal of contaminated sediment at Eagle Rock Lake and installation of a storm-water control structure for the lake inlet, and to construct piping of unused irrigation water within the eastern diversion channel adjacent to the tailing facility.

The removal of the contaminated soil at the mill area is to be completed by the end of the year, and construction of new piping is to begin in 2013. The other two phases could take much longer to complete.

"The first removals themselves will take about two years, but the rest of the cleanup is hard to estimate because some of the cleanup involves a change in mining practices," Laura Stankosky, Environmental Protection Agency remedial project coordinator, said. Three contracting firms have been hired for different parts of the cleanup.

"It's an enforcement site, and (Chevron Mine) is responsible by agreement to cleanup under E.P.A. regulation," Stankosky said. "What we are currently doing is conducting removal actions. This pertains to P.C.B.-contaminated areas ... so it won't come into contact with the historic tailings and get into sediments."

Margaret Lejuste, Chevron Mine, Inc. public affairs representative, said Chevron is still in negotiation with the E.P.A. regarding the future phases of the cleanup.

"Chevron had been identified as a potential responsible party, and Chevron is financially responsible and accepts the responsibility," Lejuste said. "The P.C.B. removals are very on-site. It's a relatively small area."

Lejuste said early actions have been negotiated, while the bigger and more complex projects are still being discussed.

“We have a very good working relationship with the E.P.A.. and state agencies,” Lejuste said.

The nine-mile pipeline that transfers molybdenum running from the facility would leak, have breaks and other problems, so the construction of the pipe would ensure no extra contaminant spills.

“Over the years, numerous breaks in the pipeline resulted in the spilling of tailings into and along the flood plain of the Red River,” the July report states, “threatening the fishery and nearby endangered species habitats” Although this has been a threat in the past, Stankosky said there is currently no threat of fish consumption that would harm humans.

In regard to the P.C.B. removal, Stankosky said, “It’s just earth-moving equipment, sampling is to be conducted, and the soil will be put into roll-off containers, which will be taken for disposal. The soil is being segregated. Anything 50 parts per million (p.p.m.) and above needs to be incinerated.

“Soil of 25 to 50 p.p.m. will go to a disposal facility in Colorado. Because this is an operating mine, the problems it would cause would be to workers at the mine. Workers who are doing the cleanup, they are in protective gear.”

After the materials are unearthed, Stankosky said, the risk of exposure becomes much greater.

“Since its still in negotiation status, the current project is just what’s outlined in the cleanup,” Stankosky said.

Concerns with rock tailings, which contain acid-generating rocks that can seep into groundwater, are being discussed between the two entities.

“They need to evaluate different methods regarding a suitable cover that will support plants and a soil cover,” Stankosky said, adding that the cover is “a kind of rock cover like the soil that exists in the mountains in that area.”

For this to work, the mine is constructing more feasible and environmentally sound mining techniques.

“Chevron Mine, Inc. is trying to do some modernization of their mining techniques,” Stankosky said. “What they’ve been discussing — in a preliminary investigation — is dry-paced handling. It involves less water, and the tailings are made into a big brick. The metals won’t (come) out, and those bricks can be used as stabilizing components, which can be used in shoring up the rock piles.”

Because the mine is still in operation, the main goal is to meet regulatory requirements for the slope of the rock piles, Stankosky said, in order to minimize the risk of contaminants flowing into the area. She also said there’s not a human health risk — at this time — from the tailings, but there is the potential that risk could materialize in the future.

“The metals can get into the groundwater, but no one is using (consuming) that groundwater right now,” Stankosky said.

Cleanup procedures are to take place one at a time.

“Once the first parts are complete, they’ll start on the pipeline to reroute around historic tailings,” Stankosky said. “Irrigation water flows over (in Eagle Rock Lake), so (the new pipe) will prevent that water from infiltrating and affecting ground water. Also this year, they’re going to install a head gate so they can operate it for about a year, work out all the kinks, and next year they’ll address dredging of the lake. Also starting in the spring next year, they’ll start work on tailing spills on the nine-mile pipeline.”

Some of the metals in the entire cleanup area include aluminum, arsenic, cadmium, chromium, cobalt, fluoride, lead, manganese, molybdenum, sulfate and zinc, according to the July release.

For more information and monthly updates on the Chevron Mine cleanup site, visit *www.epa.gov/region6/6sf/ 6sf-nm.htm* and click on the “Molycorp. Inc” tab.