

## **Chevron Mining to decommission tailings ponds using new facility**

**By J.R. Logan**

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Chevron Mining is constructing a massive wastewater treatment plant at its Questa molybdenum mine so it can stop sending waste tailings by pipeline to a location nine miles away.

The new treatment facility covers two full acres and is nearly five stories tall. It is expected to be operational by late next year. Regulators have given Chevron until October 2016 to stop pumping slurry to the tailings ponds west of Questa entirely. The plan is to instead “de-water” tailings at the mill and pump them uphill to the mine’s open pit, which hasn’t been used for mining since 1983. All mining is now done underground.

This alternative method for processing tailings is expected to reduce the potential for contaminating ground and surface water, cut the mine’s water needs, and dramatically speed cleanup of mine waste at the existing tailings ponds.

The Questa mine was officially listed as a Superfund site in 2011. A year earlier, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposed a massive cleanup plan, which came with an estimated \$800 million price tag. Chevron is on the hook for the full clean-up cost, though much of the contamination was created when the mine was owned by MolyCorp. The most costly and time consuming item on the remediation to-do list is regrading enormous piles of potentially acid-generating waste rock that surround the mine, but the company has already started addressing several other areas of concern.

Chevron began its cleanup effort in summer 2012 by removing contaminated soils at the mine’s mill site. The company also began cleaning up historic spills from the tailings pipeline beside the Red River last year, and it expects to finish removing debris from those spills this year. Pipeline spills were a regular occurrence for decades along river.

Environmental advocates have lauded the alternative tailings plan because it makes the pipeline obsolete and will allow problems at the tailings ponds to be solved more easily. The new wastewater facility will also cut the mine’s operational water needs by creating a “closed loop” water system. Water removed from tailings or collected from stormwater drainage works will be processed by the plant. From there, cleaned water can be sent back to the mill or put into the Red River. Water going to the river must meet EPA standards spelled out in a discharge permit approved late last year.

Chevron did not disclose how much it is spending to revamp how it processes tailings, but spokeswoman Margaret LeJuste said the new facility was indicative of Chevron’s commitment to operations at the Questa mine.

The transition to thickened tailings coincides with efforts underground to get ready to resume mining activity. Molybdenum prices have been low in recent years, meaning there's been very little actual mining or milling taking place. Mine manager Phil Howard said crews are prepping two separate mining areas for future ore removal.

Howard says there are about 260 people working at the mine now. Howard says the mine plans to ramp up production and resume some milling in 2016, bringing the total employee count to around 315.

At the moment, most of the activity at the mine is related to reclamation efforts and construction of the new water treatment facility. Other projects related to the Superfund cleanup include the dredging of Eagle Rock Lake, which is expected to take place this summer. The lake will be drained, dredged, and lined before being refilled. The entire project is expected to take between four and six months.

Contractors for Chevron are also building a pipeline along the eastern edge of the tailings ponds to divert unused irrigation water and keep it from re-wetting old tailings.

In addition, Chevron is drilling additional monitoring wells at the tailing facility to measure groundwater flows. Contaminated water has been seeping from the tailings ponds for years, though its unclear exactly where it ends up. The new wells are meant to give regulators a better picture of what's happening so a long-term solution can be developed.

While cleanup work is moving forward, Chevron Mining filed a lawsuit against the federal government last year, arguing the U.S. needs to pay part of the clean-up costs because the government played an instrumental role in promoting mining at the site more than half a century ago.

In a statement last year, Chevron said it hoped to find a compromise that would avoid the cost of litigation and pointed out that it was still cooperating with the mandated cleanup. Online records show the case is still moving forward.



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A new wastewater treatment facility being erected at the Questa mine is meant to provide an alternative method for processing tailings that would store them in the mine's open pit. This transition will eventually lead to the removal of nine miles of pipeline along the Red River and the decommissioning of the tailings ponds west of Questa.