

Gold King Mine Spill's ground water investigated in NM

Written by By Allison Scott Majure Communications Director NM Environment Department
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Sediments left behind

FARMINGTON— Seven well water testing teams were deployed by the New Mexico Environment Department in concert with the Environmental Protection Agency to test domestic water wells near the Animas River which flows through Farmington and Aztec, New Mexico Aug. 11.

“Although the Gold King Mine Spill’s heavy metals plume has mostly passed through the area, the sediments left behind are capable of influencing groundwater quality,” New Mexico Environment Secretary Ryan Flynn said. “We are operating with an abundance of caution, on behalf of New Mexicans’ health and safety, by advising that no water from San Juan County’s domestic wells or from the Animas River be used for bathing, cooking, drinking, or for watering livestock or crops. We want to be certain that domestic well water is safe and that Animas River water is safe, before we would evaluate lifting our water quality safety precautions.”

The Animas River is the site of the heavy metals wastewater plume that flowed from EPA’s Gold King Mine spill of August 5.

Teams of scientists, engineers, and technicians have fanned out across San Juan County this week to test domestic wells for hydrogeological properties such as elevation and conductivity in relation to those wells’ ability to transmit contamination from the plume, or from the sediments left in its wake. In addition, water samples from these same wells are being collected and tested for heavy metals by conducting laboratory analysis with initial results expected tomorrow, then throughout the week. The Environment Department is also operating a walk-in water testing station every day at the San Juan County Fair, located near the Sheriff’s office from 8 am – 5 pm through Saturday.

Gov. Susana Martinez declared a state of emergency yesterday with an Executive Order, freeing up \$750,000 in state funds for water well testing, for evaluating the potential long-term effects of the spill, for support of the state’s multi-agency response team, and for other mitigation and response efforts that become necessary in the future. These funds are in addition to the \$500,000 in state emergency funds that Flynn secured from the Hazardous Waste Emergency Fund last Friday.

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Meanwhile, the Environment Department's results from well testing in the Animas floodplain indicate that the specific conductivity for ground water is higher than the river water's specific conductivity. This means that it is likely that the floodplain ground water feeds the river flow and the threat of contamination of wells is reduced. However the Environment Department's water quality safety precautions remain in place for San Juan County.

The Environment Department continues gathering samples from San Juan County's Animas & San Juan River and has posted the preliminary results of those tests. www.nmedriverwatersafety.org. Also posted are EPA's publicly released data of Colorado's Cement Creek and the Upper Animas River.

Visit: NMEDRiverWaterSafety.org