

U.S.

E.P.A. Is Moving to Designate Contaminated Nevada Copper Mine a Superfund Site

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RENO, Nev. — Fifteen years after federal regulators started assessing damage and health risks at an abandoned Nevada copper mine, the Environmental Protection Agency is moving to designate the contaminated land a Superfund site, a step the state could still oppose.

Rural neighbors of the World War II-era mine that has leaked toxic chemicals for decades won a \$19.5 million settlement in 2013 from companies they accused of covering up the contamination to drinking water wells near Yerington, about 65 miles southeast of Reno.

The E.P.A. sent a letter to Gov. Brian Sandoval this week announcing its intention to place the mine on the Superfund's National Priority List of the nation's most polluted sites to "mitigate exposures that are a substantial threat to the public health or welfare or the environment."

"If we do not receive a written response from the state by Jan. 29, we will assume that Nevada is in agreement with E.P.A. and will proceed with proposing the site for addition to the N.P.L.," Jared Blumenfeld, the agency's regional

administrator in San Francisco, wrote in a Dec. 22 letter obtained by The Associated Press.

State officials said they needed to review the letter and determine their next steps. “We’re not going to worry about turf,” said Leo Drozdoff, director of the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. “What we want is the best and quickest remedy for the site.”

Nevada has opposed past E.P.A. proposals to list the site, fearing a stigma that might affect property values and any precedent that could be set by federal intervention in the mining-friendly state, the world’s sixth-biggest producer of gold.

Nevada regulators estimated earlier this year that it would cost \$30.4 million to address only what the E.P.A. considers the most immediate health and safety concerns, and the state has been unsuccessful in obtaining financial assistance from those responsible for the damage. Under the Superfund listing, the E.P.A. would cover 90 percent of the costs.

The federal proposal comes after residents filed a class-action lawsuit in 2011 accusing Atlantic Richfield and parent company BP America of “intentionally and negligently” concealing the extent of uranium, arsenic and other pollutants leaking into their drinking water wells from the mine.

The mine covers six square miles of land owned partly by the federal Bureau of Land Management. Atlantic Richfield acquired the property in 1977 from Anaconda Copper, which built the mine in 1941. Atlantic Richfield has paid for other work on the site, a BP spokesman, Jason Ryan, said.

Previous owners left behind 90 million gallons of acidic solution that continues to threaten the groundwater, Mr. Blumenfeld said. That is equivalent to the amount of liquid it would take to cover about 80 football fields, 10 feet deep.

In 2008, a federal Labor Department review panel upheld a whistle-blower claim by a former mine cleanup supervisor, Earle Dixon, who said that the Bureau of Land Management illegally fired him for speaking out about the risks in defiance of local politicians.

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