

Questa gets \$2.3M to help prevent future water contamination

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A \$2.3 million settlement from an old, polluted mine operation will help the village of Questa prevent future contamination of its water systems, a state official said Tuesday.

The money will go toward improving the Northern New Mexico town's water and wastewater infrastructure to protect residents' health and the area's water resources, state Natural Resources Trustee Maggie Hart Stebbins said.

"In my mind it is exciting to have these dollars finally go to work for the people of Questa," she added.

The funds are part of a larger \$4 million settlement reached in 2015 between Chevron Mining Inc. and the Office of Natural Resources Trustee, the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Interior Department.

"We must hold those who cause legacy contamination in New Mexico accountable," state Environment Secretary James Kenney said in a statement.

A former operator, Molycorp Inc., conducted open-pit mining of molybdenum from the 1920s until the 1980s, causing heavy contamination.

In 2011, the Environmental Protection Agency put the 3-square-mile site on the Superfund's national priorities list. That year, the EPA and Chevron reached an agreement compelling the company to remove contaminants from the site.

"The investigation showed there were very high levels of acid drainage and toxic metals in the watershed surrounding the village of Questa," Hart Stebbins said. "It was a very extensive contamination spike."

It wreaked damage on surface water, groundwater, fish populations and wildlife habitat, she said.

In 2015, after Chevron reached a settlement with state and federal agencies, the Office of Natural Resources Trustee began developing a restoration plan and environmental assessment of the area, said Hart Stebbins, who was appointed trustee in December.

The state agency, which is taking the lead in this case, is an independent office that assesses the damage contaminants cause to natural resources and seeks compensation from the polluters.

Aside from the Questa water improvements, the settlement also will fund projects to restore Red River aquatic habitat within Questa and the Midnight Meadows wetlands in the Carson National Forest.

It also calls for about 225 acres known as the Anderson Ranch to be transferred to the Bureau of Land Management for conservation.
