

Silver City sewer project marks end of mining settlement

Theresa Davis / Journal Staff Writer

By [Theresa Davis / Journal Staff Writer](#)

Published: Friday, January 8th, 2021 at 5:33pm

Updated: Friday, January 8th, 2021 at 10:55pm



The Chino Mine is 12 miles east of Silver City. A \$1.3 million Silver City sewer improvement project will use the last of a \$13 million settlement by the Freeport McMoRan Mining Co., which owns the Chino, Tyrone and Cobre mine sites that leaked hazardous chemicals into surface water and groundwater. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

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Nearly 30 Silver City homes will be connected to municipal sewer lines as the final project using settlement funds from the Freeport McMoRan Mining Co.

The Town of Silver City will use \$1.3 million from the settlement for the Indian Hills neighborhood project.

In 2011, the mining company settled with the New Mexico Office of the Natural

Resources Trustee and agreed to pay \$13 million for groundwater damage.

Natural Resources Trustee Maggie Hart Stebbins said the office asked area residents how they wanted the money to be used.



Maggie Hart Stebbins

“It’s a priority for me to see how we can get these dollars working for the communities that were injured by these (hazardous) releases,” she said.

The Chino, Tyrone and Cobre copper and iron mine sites date back more than a century. For decades, the sites have leaked a long list of hazardous chemicals into surface water and groundwater. Contaminants include arsenic, sulfuric acid and lead.

One major breach in 1999 at the now-closed Cobre mine site released 8 million gallons of mine waste into Hanover Creek and nearby streams, according to the 2011 consent decree.

The document states that the money be used to “restore, replace, rehabilitate and/or acquire the equivalent of groundwater resources injured, destroyed or lost” because of the toxic leaks.

The latest project will also decommission the existing septic systems and build a sewer lift station.

Freeport McMoRan also paid \$5.5 million for wildlife and habitat damage in a 2012 settlement with the Office of the Natural Resources Trustee and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The settlement money has funded \$5 million for Silver City groundwater protection projects and connected nearly 220 of the town’s residences to sewer systems.

The office also recently reached a \$150,000 settlement with Fronk Oil Co. for a 2016 fuel spill into the Cimarron River.

“I was pleased that Fronk Oil became a partner in this restoration project, because I think it sets an example for other companies by displaying an understanding that companies have the responsibility to make residents whole,” Hart Stebbins said. “Unfortunately, \$150,000 does not buy a lot of restoration. But our intention is if the court approves the settlement, it will add funding to an existing project restoring trout habitat on the Cimarron River.”

Other projects in the works include groundwater and habitat restoration at Fort Wingate and identifying cleanup solutions for groundwater contaminated by NASA activities at White Sands Test Facility.

Theresa Davis is a Report for America corps member covering water and the environment for the Albuquerque Journal.