

LOCAL

New Mexico agency proposes four projects be undertaken with Gold King Mine settlement money

Funding comes from Sunnyside Gold Corporation as part of settlement

Mike Easterling Farmington Daily Times

Published 3:42 p.m. MT Jan. 31, 2022 | Updated 5:58 p.m. MT Jan. 31, 2022

Story Highlights

State officials are encouraging members of the public to comment on the plan through March 2.

When the public comment period is complete, state officials will issue a final plan.

A state official hopes to begin awarding contracts for the project as quickly as possible.

FARMINGTON — A state agency is seeking public comment on a plan to use \$1 million in funding secured from a company that entered into a no-fault settlement related to the 2015 Gold King Mine spill to pay for four public works projects in San Juan County.

The New Mexico Office of Natural Resources Trustee announced in a news release issued on Jan. 31 that it plans to use the money obtained from the Sunnyside Gold Corporation to help pay for:

- Construction of a boat ramp on the Animas River in Cedar Hill.
- Construction of a pavilion at a proposed park in Farmington.
- The implementation of a soil health restoration project in the San Juan Valley.
- The implementation of an agricultural irrigation system upgrade project for the Tse Daa Kaan (Hogback) community on the Navajo Nation.

State officials are encouraging members of the public to comment on the plan through March 2.

Maggie Hart Stebbins, the natural resources trustee, said the list of proposed projects was compiled after her agency sent a letter to local stakeholders and published a press release on July 15, 2021, soliciting project proposals for how to spend the money.

The input received from that outreach effort was used to create a draft plan, which is the document that was released on Jan. 31.

More: Farmington's Merrion Oil & Gas prepares for leadership, generational transition

"We really want these dollars to be used in a way the community supports," Hart Stebbins said.

After the public comment period has concluded, she said her agency will move quickly to conclude the process.

"We will issue a final restoration plan and promptly begin (awarding) contracts for these projects," she said.

The \$1 million sum is intended to fully fund each of the projects or pay for a portion of them in partnership with other entities. Hart Stebbins said the money would entirely cover the costs of the boat ramp and the soil health restoration project, while the state will partner with the City of Farmington on the pavilion, which is targeted for the Farmington Farmers Market site adjacent to the Farmington Museum at Gateway Park at 3041 E. Main St.

City officials have been pursuing a plan for the past few years to construct an "iconic" city park at the site that includes such a structure.

More: Iconic Aztec Theater sign glows again after more than decade of darkness

Hart Stebbins said the draft plans calls for the remainder of the money to be used for the Hogback irrigation system upgrade, contingent on the Hogback Chapter securing additional funding for another phase of the project.

She said her agency will try to release the final restoration plan within a week of the end of the public comment period, meaning contracts for the work could begin to be awarded after that. She said her agency's goal all along has been to get the money into New Mexico and get it working for the community as quickly as possible.

"We are really excited about all four of these projects and our partners," she said, adding that the four proposed projects are highly visible and likely would be very meaningful for the people who live on the Animas and San Juan rivers.

The Sunnyside Gold Corporation was one of the operators of the abandoned Gold King Mine near Silverton, Colorado, which spilled million of gallons of contaminated water into the Animas River in the summer of 2015. The contamination plume, which featured toxic metals and acidic waste, later reached the San Juan River via the Animas River.

More: Farmington artist receives \$9,100 grant to stage satirical performance art piece

State officials reached a \$1 million settlement with the Sunnyside Gold Corporation for its role in the disaster in January 2021, according to the news release. The state is pursuing litigation against other parties involved in the spill, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the news release states.

The draft restoration plan and documents associated with the spill can be viewed at <https://onrt.env.nm.gov/gold-king-mine-documents/>. A hard copy of the plan also can be obtained by request from the Office of Natural Resources Trustee, 121 Tijeras NE, Albuquerque, NM 87102 or by calling 505-313-1837. A hard copy also may be viewed at the agency's Farmington Field Office at 1800 E. 30th St., Suite B.

Comments on the plan can be submitted to Michelle Hunter of the New Mexico Office of Natural Resources Trustee via email at nm.onrt@state.nm.us or mailed to the agency's Albuquerque address listed above. All comments should reference "Draft Restoration Plan for the Gold King Mine Release."

The settlement was reached after Sunnyside faced allegations in federal court that bulkheads installed at its mine, American Tunnel, caused changes in wastewater levels that eventually created buildup in the Gold King Mine, according to The Daily Times archives.

Archives state that a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency contracted crew accidentally released the wastewater when they breached a collapsed portal at the Gold King Mine in August 2015.

Sunnyside's director of reclamation told The Daily Times in 2019 that Sunnyside owns mines near the Gold King Mine, but it never owned or operated the Gold King Mine and was not involved in the spill.

The EPA declared the Bonita Peak Mining District a superfund site in September 2016.

Mike Easterling can be reached at 505-564-4610 or measterling@daily-times.com. Support local journalism with a digital subscription.