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State plans four restoration projects with \$1 million from Gold King spill settlement

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The state released a \$1 million draft plan Monday aimed at helping to restore some areas damaged in the 2015 Gold King Mine blowout, which released millions of gallons of water laced with toxic metals and acidic waste into the Animus and San Juan rivers near Silverton, Colo.

The restoration is part of the \$11 million settlement New Mexico reached a year ago with Sunnyside Gold Corp. and its two parent companies.

The public is invited to weigh in on the four projects that would be covered under the plan during a comment period that runs through March 2.

“With these projects, the state is taking the next step in making whole communities that were so negatively affected by the Gold King Mine release,” state Natural Resources Trustee Maggie Hart Stebbins said in a statement.

The plan calls for:

- San Juan County to build the Cedar Hill Boat Ramp on the Animas River.
- The city of Farmington to build the Festival and Farmers Market Pavilion at Gateway Park.

The San Juan County Soil and Water Conservation District to implement a soil restoration project in San Juan Valley.

- The Tse Daa Kaan Chapter of Navajo Nation to upgrade its irrigation system.

The other \$10 million in the settlement covers environmental response costs and lost tax revenue, among other things.

Sunnyside Gold oversaw construction of the bulkheads that led to mines filling with acidic water.

State officials also blame the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency because its workers and contractors caused the spill while trying to drain ponds near the mine's entrance.

The state has sued the EPA and its contractors, alleging gross negligence, nuisance and trespassing, as well as violations of federal environmental laws.

The case against the EPA is expected to go to trial in the coming year.

New Mexico, local governments and tribal nations incurred hefty costs cleaning up the contamination. The pollution harmed the agricultural, recreation and tourism industries in the state's northwest corner, Hart Stebbins said.

Although testing shows water used to irrigate crops in the Animas Valley is now safe, farmers continue to see lower sales due the stigma from the toxic spill, state regulators say.

"We are honoring the requests of area residents in funding these projects that will benefit farmers who still struggle with the lingering stigma of the spill and residents who use the river for recreation," Hart Stebbins said.

If You Go

How to submit comments on proposed restoration projects

Comments should be addressed to:

Michelle Hunter, New Mexico Office of Natural Resources Trustee, at nm.onrt@state.nm.us or at 121 Tijeras Avenue NE, Suite 1000, Albuquerque, NM 87102.

They should refer to the Draft Restoration Plan for the Gold King Mine Release.

Comments must be received in writing by 5 p.m., March 2 to be considered.

For more information on the settlement visit:

<https://onrt.env.nm.gov/gold-king-mine-and-bonita-peak-mining-district/> or

<https://www.env.nm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021-01-13-State-reaches-11-million-settlement-over-Gold-King-Mine-disaster.pdf>.

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