

Residents below mine tunnel warned of water danger

Feb. 15 -- Lake County, Colo., officials are warning residents living below an old mine drainage tunnel there is an imminent potential for catastrophic failure, which could send a billion gallons of toxic acid and metal-laden water flowing toward their homes.

State Sen. Tom Wiens, a Republican, is calling on Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter Jr. and President Bush to declare an emergency in Lake County, which would free up funds for the immediate dewatering of the Leadville Mine Drainage Tunnel.

The Leadville Mine Drainage Tunnel, owned and operated by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, is experiencing a serious blockage, which has allowed a billion gallons of contaminated water to back up, according to county officials. A nearly 200-foot-high wall of water is creating significant hydraulic pressure against the blockage and creates an immediate risk of a catastrophic blow out, according to a statement released Feb. 13 by the county commissioners.

"Such a massive release of toxic polluted water could result in severe loss of life and property and cause extreme damage to the Arkansas River and its watershed," according to the commissioners.

The snow pack is rapidly building to historic levels, they said, and once it begins to melt in the spring, water will infiltrate the mine pool and increase the risk.

Commissioners Kenneth Olsen, Michael Hickman and Carl Schaefer compare the situation to the 1976 Teton Dam disaster. When the Idaho dam, which also was managed by the Bureau of Reclamation, failed, 80 billion gallons of water rushed out, killing 14 people and causing about \$1 billion in environmental damage.

To support their position, county commissioners released a November 2007 letter from EPA Regional Administrator Robert E. Robert to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. In the letter, Robert expressed his concern about the tunnel.

"Due to the unknown condition of the tunnel blockages and the large volume of water behind the blockages, we are concerned that an uncontrolled, potentially catastrophic release of water to the Arkansas River from the LMDT is likely at some point," Robert wrote.

The sudden release of water would endanger the lives of people living at a nearby trailer park and Bureau of Reclamation employees, according to Robert. In addition, "the sudden release of water, rock, sediment, and heavy metals to the Arkansas River would be an environmental disaster," he wrote.

Meanwhile, state Sen. Wiens said the situation at the drainage tunnel is severe and the time has come for an immediate fix.

"The federal government is responsible for this property, and they need to fix it," Wiens said. "Federal funds must be made available and the United States Bureau of Reclamation authorities must be required to take immediate action to relieve the pressure inside the LMDT."

The tunnel collects heavy metal and acid mine drainage from many abandoned mines in the area and transports the contaminated water to a treatment facility operated by the Bureau of Reclamation.

BOR officials have posted at their Web site a Community Safety Plan for the area. In the document, the agency describes its monitoring procedures, an emergency siren notification system that was installed several years ago, and advises residents to establish a plan for heading to higher ground in what the bureau calls "the unlikely event of an emergency at the LMDT."

BOR officials could not be reached for comment, but a bureau spokesman told the Associated Press that there was no immediate threat to Leadville's 2,700 residents.

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