

RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

EPA plans \$7 million system to clean up Sierra mine

ASSOCIATED PRESS
6/26/2005 11:11 pm

GARDNERVILLE (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency intends to install a new \$7 million system to provide year-round cleanup at an abandoned sulfur mine in the eastern Sierra Nevada.

Project manager Kevin Mayer said the system should be operating by the winter of 2006-07 at the polluted Leviathan Mine site 25 miles southwest of Gardnerville.

Since making the Superfund list of the country's most polluted sites in 2000, the area in California's rugged Alpine County has been the focus of increased cleanup efforts.

A toxic stew of acid and dissolved heavy metals has collected at the 250-acre site for half a century and polluted streams in the upper Carson River basin.

Since the cleanup began, efforts have been discontinued every winter because of harsh conditions at the 7,000-foot elevation site.

The EPA hopes the new treatment system can be effective through the winter with no human operation, Mayer said.

"Even though it's not the highest elevation mine for cleanup and it's not the largest volume of contamination being generated, it's the most remote site," Mayer said.

"At nearly every other site you can actually have personnel be there every day, checking valves and gauges. We can't do that for basically half the year," Mayer said.

Actively treating acid mine drainage without day-to-day access by personnel in the winter has not been implemented anywhere else in the nation, Mayer said.

"We have some pretty important trial runs this summer and this winter," he said. "We're not going to risk having a system where the pump might fail and dump more acid in one big flush."

Mayer said he's more optimistic than he was three years ago that the site will be completely cleaned up.

"We're convinced the bugs and the fish will come back into Leviathan Creek," Mayer said. "We just want to make sure that it will be a safe home for them all year round."

The Leviathan Mine opened in 1863 as a source of copper sulfate for processing silver ore from Comstock Lode mines in the Virginia City area.

The mine closed but was reopened for sulfur mining from 1935 to 1941. After buying it in 1951, the Anaconda Co. used open-pit mining to extract sulfur for about 10 years.