

Plans for mine cleanups in Lake, Sonoma counties

BLM will hold public meetings to unveil clean up plans, costs for Gold Rush era mercury mines

Glenda Anderson, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 6-25-10

More than 50 years after they were abandoned, three mercury mines near the border of Sonoma and Lake counties plans are ripe for a clean up.

This week the Bureau of Land Management will unveil its recommendations for the Contact and Sonoma mercury mines in Sonoma County and the Helen mercury mine in Lake County at public meetings in Healdsburg and Middletown.

They're among more than 500 mercury mines that still dot the California landscape, reminders of Gold Rush times when liquid mercury, called quicksilver, was excavated for use in gold and silver mining operations.

Between 1850 and 1981, more than 220 million pounds of mercury was produced in California, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Production peaked in the 1870s.

About 12 percent was used in gold mining operations in California, mostly in the Sierra Nevada and Klamath-Trinity mountains.

Sonoma County alone has 64 mercury mines, said Don Drysdale, a spokesman for the state Office of Mine Reclamation.

The Sonoma, Contact and Helen mines were built by private companies and individuals who made mining claims but they did not own the land, said Gary Sharpe, field manager for the Ukiah BLM office.

The Sonoma mine began as a group of seven unpatented mineral claims originally made by brothers Granville and Greenville Thompson in 1872. They sold their claim to the Sonoma Quicksilver Company in 1873, according to the BLM.

Like most others, they operated on public land between the mid-1880s and 1956, and were simply abandoned when they were no longer useful, Sharpe said.

Because they operated before environmental regulations, many pose potential health hazards. The Sulphur Bank Mine on the northeast shore of Clear Lake was declared a Superfund site.

When washed into waterways and wetlands, mercury can be converted by organisms into methyl mercury and enter the food chain.

When eaten, contaminated fish and aquatic plants can be toxic to humans and animals. Methyl mercury is particularly harmful to unborn and young children, causing neurological and developmental problems, but it can also cause kidney and nerve damage in adults.

Contamination is vast and cleanup efforts depend on available funding. When the land is privately owned, landowners are expected to pay.

Cleanup of the mines will focus on controlling the mercury's movement, Sharpe said.

Options include containing runoff and capping the mined materials or removing the materials.

The final cost is unknown, but, depending on which cleanup method is chosen, the BLM estimates it will cost as much as \$11 million just for the Sonoma mine site.

BLM's evaluation and cost analysis for each mine will be discussed at the public meetings. The Sonoma and Contact mines will be discussed at 7 p.m. Monday at the library on Piper Street in Healdsburg. A meeting on the Helen mercury mine, southwest of Middletown, will be held at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Jesus Christ Fellowship on Pine Road in Middletown.

The BLM studies can be found at online at www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/fo/ukiah.html.