

Iron Mountain Mine water safety in debate

Owner wants to turn it into fertilizer

Damon Arthur, Redding Record Searchlight, 1-2-11

Ted Arman says he has a plan to turn what the government considers some of the world's most polluted water into plant fertilizer.

Arman, who owns Iron Mountain Mine northwest of Redding, said he has devised a way to transform water from the mine into fertilizer.

But so far, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has not approved the sale, Arman said. The mine was designated a Superfund site in 1983 and the EPA considers its water toxic and a threat to humans.

"We wouldn't be able to sell it as a fertilizer, if it was hazardous, come on," Arman said. "We'll be selling it as a fertilizer in 30 days."

So far, though, no fertilizer has been sold. His inventory of Ag-Gel fertilizer sits in a 6,000-gallon tank next to a dilapidated shed off a dirt road that winds its way through the mine compound.

Since 1986 the EPA has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to clean up the Iron Mountain site and prevent what officials say is highly acidic water from reaching the Sacramento River.

EPA spokeswoman Mary Simms said the agency has asked Arman to provide detailed information about the safety of Ag-Gel, as well as how it can be safely produced and transported.

The water Arman wants to use to help plants grow is so acidic that humans shouldn't come in contact with it, Simms said.

"Safe measures in the transportation of this product would be necessary to ensure that it doesn't come into contact with human skin," Simms said in an email.

There also are heavy metals in the water that would pose a threat to plants and wildlife, she said.

"The agency has not rejected the proposal per se, but has required scientifically defensible test data that would confirm that any fertilizer product would not release contamination. That information has not been provided to date," Simms said.

Arman flatly disputes claims the water is toxic.

He merely has to remove the arsenic from the water and it becomes an excellent fertilizer, Arman said.

"Yeah, there's some stuff in there, but it doesn't harm your body, and the EPA knows that," Arman said.

To prove his point he takes a dipper of mine water and pours it on his hand to show that it doesn't harm people.

Arman, who turns 90 this month, bought the 3,000-acre mine in 1976. He grew up in New York, but moved to Reno to get a divorce and never left the West. He was selling aircraft parts and was an instrument flight instructor until he began investing in Nevada mines, he said.

Arman said he bought the Iron Mountain Mine for its pyrite, which he said contains gold and silver. He says there is about \$5 billion worth of minerals under the ground on his property.

But in 1983 the EPA declared the mine a Superfund site, meaning it was an uncontrolled or abandoned place where hazardous waste is located. Since then, the EPA has sunk millions into building treatment plants to remove pollutants and dams to keep toxic water from flowing into the Sacramento River.

The EPA also has blocked Arman from mining the property because of the acidic runoff coming off the property.

He claims the EPA has violated his constitutional rights by taking his property without due compensation.

While he hasn't been able to work the mine, he still has big plans for the property.

He issued a news release in December about a "unique process to recycle mine water into beneficial agricultural products developed at Iron Mountain Mine."

There also is a website marketing the fertilizer: www.esiagri.com.

He wants to build a tramway so tourists could ride a gondola from one end of his property to the next and enjoy vistas of the Sacramento Valley. And he wants to build a 200-foot tall statue of Jesus on top of a mountain on his property. Work on the Jesus statue has not begun.

There are other plans to replant trees burned in a fire three years ago, and he wants to cut down the snags and sell them as firewood.

"The entire property is a gift from God, and he wants me to do something with it — for good, not evil like the EPA," Arman said.