

Congress reviewing toxic mine spill cause by EPA

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BILLINGS, Mont. — The focus on a toxic mine spill that fouled rivers in three Western states shifts to Congress this week as lawmakers open a series of hearings into how the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency accidentally unleashed the deluge.

Republican committee leaders in the House and Senate said EPA officials were frustrating their attempts to investigate the spill by withholding documents that could explain what went wrong when a cleanup team doing excavation work triggered the release of 3 million gallons of rust-colored sludge from the inactive Gold King Mine near Silverton, Colo.

Mining industry critics and some Democrats have their own agenda: They want to use the Aug. 5 accident as leverage for proposals to make companies pay for the cleanup of thousands of abandoned mines across the U.S.

Against that political backdrop, uncertainty lingers over the long-term dangers to public health and the environment from an event that tainted rivers in Colorado, New Mexico and Utah with heavy metals. A month after the spill, EPA claims that the threat has eased, but it is still met with skepticism from the Navajo Nation, whose president said many farmers have lost a season's work and trust in the EPA has evaporated.

Rep. Lamar Smith suggested the upcoming hearings offer a chance for the agency to dispel growing suspicions over its actions. The first session is scheduled Wednesday before the House Science Committee, which the Texas Republican chairs.

“We are still, a month later, waiting for a real assessment of the health care risk to those who live near the river or might consume water from the rivers. That is inexcusable,” Smith said.

Since the mine water plume washed through, turning the Animas and San Juan rivers a disturbing orange, EPA crews have collected hundreds of water and sediment samples from the two waterways.

Concentrations of arsenic, lead and other toxins initially spiked, in some locations measuring hundreds of times higher than recommended for drinking water, according to EPA results. But federal officials have since announced significant improvements, allowing treatment plants to start drawing water from the rivers again and for advisories against fishing, boating and other recreational activities to be lifted.

EPA Assistant Administrator Mathy Stanislaus said federal officials were “being as diligent as we can, as responsive as possible.” He added that pending investigations should provide guidance on how the agency can avoid a repeat of the Gold King accident.