

Democrats urge broad action on abandoned mines

Dylan Brown, Environment & Energy Publishing, 3-24-16

House Natural Resources Committee Democrats are demanding that the panel's Republican leaders take up a pair of bills targeting the estimated 500,000 abandoned mine sites nationwide.

Committee ranking member Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) and Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources ranking member Alan Lowenthal (D-Calif.), along with four other Democrats, sent a [letter](#) to Chairman Rob Bishop (R-Utah) and subcommittee Chairman Doug Lamborn (R-Colo.) today to make their case.

The Democrats blasted their GOP counterparts for taking U.S. EPA to task for triggering the Gold King mine disaster -- a 3-million-gallon mine wastewater spill in Colorado that turned several rivers yellow -- rather than focusing on the broader issue of abandoned mines.

The Natural Resources majority is still seeking additional documents from Interior Department workers involved with an investigation of the incident. GOP lawmakers released a scathing report in February accusing them of withholding incriminating evidence against.

But the Democrats argue the administration's actions pale in comparison "to the chronic harm that people and communities throughout the country face from the safety and environmental hazards posed by abandoned mines."

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The letter cites a George W. Bush administration estimate that stopping the leaching of millions of gallons of acid mine drainage each year would cost between \$20 billion and \$54 billion. It accuses Republicans of ignoring the vast number of "ticking time bombs" by focusing on the Colorado incident.

"We are pleased that your recent attention to the Gold King Mine release shows your concern for polluted Western waterways," they wrote. "We ask that you join us in seeking a comprehensive and meaningful solution."

The Democrats pressed for a hearing on Grijalva's [H.R. 963](#), which would establish a per-ton fee on hardrock mining to help pay for cleanups, similar to an existing one for coal.

Republicans, for their part, say they have held hearings on the issue and backed several "good Samaritan" bills -- legislation that would protect groups interested in helping with cleanups from Clean Water Act and Superfund law liability.

"While voluntary and philanthropic efforts may provide relief in certain instances, they cannot come close to truly addressing the vast scale of the problem," the Democrats wrote.

Democrats are also pushing for [H.R. 4323](#), which would implement a series of regulatory recommendations made by the Bureau of Reclamation in its Gold King mine investigation report.

"Rather than continue to cast blame for that incident, we believe that a more productive way forward is to use the lessons learned to ensure it never happens again."

The other Natural Resources Democrats to sign the letter were Reps. Jared Huffman of California, Niki Tsongas of Massachusetts, Matt Cartwright of Pennsylvania and Jared Polis of Colorado.