

Nevada City lands \$600K to mop up mine mess

Michelle Rindles, Grass Valley Union, 4-23-10

Nevada City received \$600,000 from the Environmental Protection Agency this week for cleanup at Providence Mine and Stiles Mill.

“This is really a great coup for Nevada City,” said Jane Sellen, watershed coordinator for nonprofit Friends of Deer Creek, which wrote the grant on behalf of the city and will carry out the work.

The grants are part of EPA's program to improve “brownfields,” properties such as abandoned factories, gas stations and textile mills. Nevada City is one of the first sites where the EPA has turned attention to abandoned mines, Sellen said.

And they help remove toxins from the Gold Rush-era mining sites on the planned route of the long-awaited Tribute Trail.

Providence Mine is about 1/2 mile from downtown Nevada City and produced gold between 1851 and 1919, according to the grant proposal. It is now used for hiking and fishing access.

Stiles Mill is a former gold mining operation and quartz mill used in the mid-1860s. While it's close to downtown, it is difficult to access, hidden by dense trees and seldom used. The property's main feature is a giant mountain of waste rock.

Unsafe for commercial or residential development, former mine sites usually stay in city control as open space. They become “attractive nuisances” — residents want to play on the land, but run the risk of ingesting toxins and suffering brain or liver damage from lead poisoning.

In contrast is the romantic image of the Tribute Trail — a “sidewalk through the woods” leading from downtown, along Deer Creek and through public and private lands for a 9-mile loop.

Several years ago, the city received nearly \$1.2 million in grants to carry out the Tribute Trail project. But what about the toxic lead and arsenic at the mine sites along the trail?

In 2006, Nevada City received a \$200,000 EPA brownfields grant to assess five mining sites, including Providence Mine and Stiles Mill, and to plan how to make them safer.

This new round of money is the second step in the process of cleaning up the brownfields.

“It came at a good time,” said City Manager Gene Albaugh. “This will create some green jobs, and the properties involved will be available for re-use.”

With the help of the new funds for clean-up, the Tribute Trail is expected to be completed in spring 2011.

Friends of Deer Creek members are still deciding how to clean up the toxins; the method must be approved by the California Department of Toxic Substances Control.

But the group has a few options.

One is “capping” the trail surface with four inches of gravel to prevent lead-laced dust from kicking up.

Another is incorporating plant species that can absorb the contaminants. The plants can be harvested and disposed as toxic waste.

What made Nevada City attractive to the EPA was that “we had a very clear end goal for this site,” Sellen said. “We had the broader picture of the Tribute Trail and a lot of support in the area.”

Northern California communities received \$2.6 million in brownfields grants; recipients include Placer County and the city of Sacramento. Nationwide, the program distributed nearly \$80 million.

“In addition to creating green jobs, local efforts to revitalize brownfield sites reduce threats to public health while attracting positive investments in our neighborhoods,” said EPA Regional Administrator Jared Blumenfeld in a prepared statement.