Aug. 18 FAQs:
Joint Information Center

The Joint Information Center in Durango has released the following information to answer the questions and concerns that have been raised. Multiple agencies participate in providing expertise to answer the most frequently asked questions.

- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
- Colorado Department of Agriculture
- Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment
- Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Navajo Nation
- New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
- San Juan Basin Health Department
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Health and environmental impacts

What are the health risks?

- Based on the data we have seen so far, The Environmental Protection Agency and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry do not anticipate adverse health effects from exposure to the metals detected in the river water samples from skin contact or incidental (unintentional) ingestion. Similarly, the risk of adverse effects to livestock that may have been exposed to metals detected in river water samples from ingestion or skin contact is low. We will continue to evaluate water quality at locations impacted by the release.
- Although the pH levels in the Animas River between Cement Creek and Durango have returned to baseline levels, washing with soap and water after contact with untreated river water is always sound public health practice. This will minimize exposure to any metals and pathogens that may be present. We are still reviewing data on pH levels in the San Juan River and will release those as soon as they have been validated.

How do you know what the long-term effects will be?

- The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) longer-term concern is the effect of metals deposited in sediments and their release during high- water events and from recreational use over time. These sediments may pose some risk, especially to aquatic life and fish. Because the EPA has been working to assess impacts to water quality in the Animas River for several years, they have good information and data on background conditions in the river. The EPA will use this information to assess long-term needs and evaluate their progress in restoring the waters impacted by the Gold King Mine release.

What if there is contact with sediment on shore and in water?

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment stated, "Sediment is just one indicator of a healthy river. There is some level of contamination in most Colorado rivers because of past mining activities and the geology of the state," the agency added. "The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment does not anticipate adverse health effects from exposure to contaminants detected in the water and sediment during typical recreational activities."

- The San Juan Basin Heath Department concurs with the state health department findings, and advises that there are no adverse health effects from exposure to the water and sediment during normal recreational use (incidental or limited exposure). The San Juan Basin Health Department advises the public to avoid areas with orange sediment or discolored standing water. Further, anyone coming in contact with any orange sediment or discolored standing water should wash with soap and water after exposure.

Agricultural impacts (crops and livestock)

What is the impact on agriculture?

- We are certain that crops are safe for consumption. When the plume came through, irrigation ditches that impacted crops and livestock were shut down. Water quality data we have seen indicates no harmful effects on any agricultural products. Ground water and tap water have both been tested and have returned to pre-event conditions.
- Farmers and ranchers need to know the copper and sulfur levels in their hay and pastures. Typically Colorado hay is low in copper. The amount of sulfur increases in the environment from exposure to water from mine tailings. An increase in sulfur decreases the availability of copper. Therefore, cattle ranchers and farmers they need to supplement copper if they have cattle.

Can I open my ditch and begin irrigating my crops?

- Based on the information the Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA) has received, farmers can irrigate their crops from the Animas River. CDA does not have regulatory authority over the ditches but are comfortable with irrigation beginning since reports show the water quality levels are comparable to those prior to the spill.

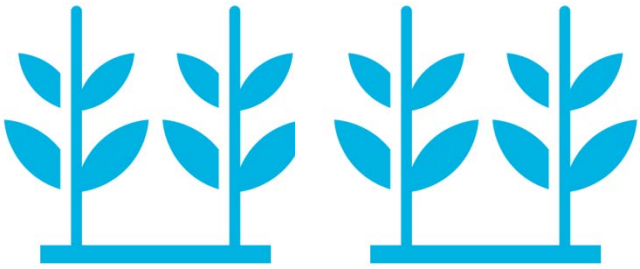
Effects on livestock

- The Colorado Department of Agriculture State Veterinarian's Office is confident that water from the Animas River can be used to water livestock.

"The information we have received shows that water quality levels are comparable to those prior to the spill," said Dr. Carl Heckendorf, State Veterinarian for the Colorado Department of Agriculture. "We will continue to monitor the situation and will provide updates if it becomes necessary."

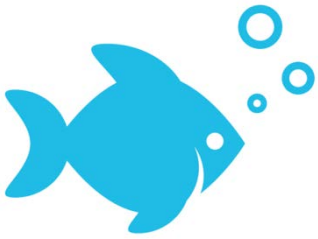
Long term effects?

- It is too early to tell if there will be long term affects to the agricultural industry. But, from the information we have received, ranchers can water their livestock from the Animas River. We do not have regulatory authority over the ditches, but are comfortable with irrigation since reports show the water quality levels are comparable to those prior to the spill. Also, most farmers shut their head gates early so the contaminated water reached very little cropland.



Wildlife impacts (birds, fish, mammals)

What about wildlife and fish?



The assessment of impacts to wildlife and fish populations in both the Animas and San Juan Rivers is ongoing but promising. The Environmental Protection Agency is working with the State of Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife, the New Mexico Department of Game Fish, the Navajo Nation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to investigate reports of impacts to wildlife.

There were no fish kills along the Animas River during the plume event. Biologists walked and paddled the river looking for dead fish. There was also no evidence of scavenging by birds or other mammals.

- No effects were seen on terrestrial animals – ducks, mammals, etc. Ducks have been seen back on the river since Monday, Aug. 10.
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife biologists placed fingerling rainbow trout in the Animas River in Durango the afternoon of Aug. 6 before the mine-spill plume reached the city. 108 fish were placed at three separate locations in cages. Fingerlings were used because they are most sensitive to environmental changes. Only 1 fish died, but not due to water quality. The fish remained healthy throughout the event and afterwards. They were removed from the river on Aug. 11.
- After being removed from the river the fish were frozen and taken to Denver, where they'll be tested for toxicity by the Colorado Department of Health and Environment. Scientists will be looking for deposits of metals in tissue and organs. Those results will not be known for at least two weeks.
- During the week of Aug. 24, CPW biologists will electro-fish the Animas River in Durango to check on populations of wild fish – sculpin, suckers, rainbow trout and brown trout. Some of those fish will also be sent to Denver for testing.
- The Animas River has been affected by acid-mine run-off for decades and that has been detrimental to fish populations for many years. CPW has seen a noticeable decline in the number of trout in the river for the last 10 years. There are very few fish found from Silverton to Baker's Bridge. The bridge is located about 10 miles north of Durango.
- While this information is encouraging in terms of short-term impacts to fish, we will be evaluating long-term impacts associated with exposure to the plume and the impacts of deposited sediments over time. EPA will be working with the States of Colorado, New Mexico and the Navajo Nation to evaluate these and other ecological impacts as we move forward.