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Silver Ledge Mine Reclamation

With over 100 years in the making, the legacy of hard rock mining in the San Juan Mountains of SW Colorado has left a remarkable history as well as a toxic legacy. From 1871 until the late 20th century, mining for gold, silver and other metal have been the lifeblood of San Juan County. It was not until the 1990's that a concentrated effort was made to address the issue of heavy metal contamination of the Animas River and its tributaries. Looking at the threat of making this scenic area a EPA Superfund site, the local community stepped up to work with the EPA on addressing these issues. From this, the Animas River Stakeholders Group was formed in 1994. A locally lead,



collaborative group of concerned citizens, local organizations, mining companies, along with federal, state and local governments all working toward a common goal of improving the water quality of the Animas River. The San Juan RC&D took on a major role with this group, serving as fiscal agent, holding the many grants and contracts for the work, and providing a neutral organization that could work with the various stakeholders in this project.

The initial steps were to sample and record the hundreds of mine tailings piles and draining mines throughout the area. After a detailed sampling was completed, it was found that only about 10% of the sites were contributing about 90% of the pollution. With this information, plans could be made and action taken toward reaching their goals.

Over the last 16 years, 31 of the worst polluting mine sites have been address. Over 30 million dollars have spent from federal, state and local governments along with the biggest amount coming from the mining companies in the area.

An example of the work that is taking place in the Upper Animas Watershed is the 2010 Sliver Ledge Mine Cleanup and Headframe Stabilization. The Silver Ledge mine was first opened in the 1880's and mined up until about 1950. As was typical of the times, the waste rock was dumped into Mineral Creek. This material was contaminating the stream and needed to be removed. The Animas River Stakeholders Group, the San Juan RC&D, Colorado Dept. of Mines, Reclamation and Safety received NPS 319 funding from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to complete this project.

A plan was developed, bids requested and a contractor selected to do the work. The work consisted of removing about 6000 tons of waste rock from Mineral Creek and the stream bank.

Materials were also removed from around the mine area and placed in an existing trench that was used as a repository. The repository was constructed to keep water from leaching through the tailings and protect it into the future. It was capped with material that formed an impervious cap, providing a long term solution to safely storing these materials.

The historic Silver Ledge Headframe is an important structure in the area and was showing signs of its ages. Additional funds were located to allow for work to be done to stabilize this structure and help preserve it until a more complete restoration could be done.

This project is just the latest in the work of the San Juan RC&D, Animas River Stakeholders and many others in helping to clean up the watersheds that we live in. For more detailed information on the San Juan RC&D and their projects, please visit the websites listed below.

San Juan RC&D

www.sanjuanrcd.org

Animas River Stakeholders Group

www.animasriverstakeholders.org

Good Samaritan Legislation

<http://goodsamaritaninfo.org/legislation.htm>