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# DENVER AND THE WEST

## Interior Secretary Jewell to testify on Gold King, mines at hearing

White House proposes fee on mining companies to raise funds for long-delayed cleanups

By **Bruce Finley**

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The Obama administration is weighing in on the problem of acid drainage from inactive mines, proposing a fee on companies working on public and private lands to raise funds for long-delayed cleanups.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell is poised to propose the fee Wednesday in testimony before the House Committee on Natural Resources, calling cleanup of abandoned mines in Colorado and the West a costly problem that requires a long-term source of funding.

"We welcome the opportunity to work with the committee and Congress to address this significant challenge," Jewell will testify, according to prepared remarks provided to The Denver Post.

The White House push — to ensure cleanup costs "are not solely borne by the taxpayer," Jewell will testify — would levy an abandoned mine lands fee on uranium and metal mining assessed on the volume of minerals extracted, starting Jan. 1.

Funds collected — an estimated \$1.8 billion through 2026 — would be split for projects on federal and non-federal lands.

The Aug. 5 [Gold King Mine disaster](#) in southwestern Colorado has spurred [renewed congressional action](#) to address the long-running problem of [tens of thousands of inactive mines in Colorado and western states](#) that leak acid water laden with toxic heavy metals into headwaters of the nation's rivers.

House members have asked Jewell to discuss the Department of Interior's response to the EPA-triggered Gold King incident in which a botched EPA cleanup caused a 3 million-gallon deluge that worsened contamination of the Animas River.

They've also asked her to discuss a technical investigation done at the request of the EPA, which some members have criticized as lax. Majority Republicans are expected

to grill Jewell, saying Interior let EPA off too easily and that Interior's investigation should have addressed why the EPA began excavating at Gold King after Interior officials agreed to consult with the EPA on the project. The EPA in July sought advice on EPA plans for Gold King, and Interior officials had scheduled a site visit for Aug. 14 — yet an EPA crew started digging before then.

Interior officials were tasked with assessing EPA actions that led to the catastrophe. The investigation concluded the spill resulted from rushing with inadequate engineering know-how and could have been prevented. It found that man-made changes underground, including installation of bulkhead plugs [at the nearby Sunnyside Mine](#), primed conditions for the blowout and that this could have been avoided if the EPA and its contractors used a drill to check wastewater levels inside the mine before digging with heavy machinery to open a clogged portal.

"We stand by our report," spokeswoman Jessica Kershaw said Tuesday.

After the spill, [EPA officials admitted a tragically botched cleanup](#) and the agency conducted an internal review.

Thousands of the abandoned mines around the West are located on private lands and on federally managed public lands, where cleanup costs have been estimated as high as \$21 billion in a recent study.

Environmental groups tracking the problem are focusing on cleanup solutions, warning of risks of more blowouts as timbers and tailings around inactive mines gradually collapse.

"While the House Natural Resources Committee continues to play the Gold King Mine blame game, the solution to abandoned mine cleanup and prevention of future disasters is obvious. They should pass 1872 Mining Law reform," Earthworks' Aaron Mintzes said.

The committee is handling a legislative proposal that would set up an abandoned mine reclamation fee and require better environmental performance by mining companies. Colorado Reps. Doug Lamborn and Jared Polis serve on the committee.

In her prepared testimony, Jewell says federal officials are discovering an average of 5,400 new abandoned mine sites every year across nearly 250 million acres of Bureau of Land Management terrain. And more than 3,800 mining related "features" on National Park Service land — in 76 parks — require remedial action to address public safety threats and harm to the environment.

"In Colorado, the BLM has prioritized site reclamation in the Gold King Mine area and is coordinating with the local community and other agencies to develop a comprehensive solution for the large number of abandoned mine sites in the area, which are both on federal and non-federal lands," Jewell's testimony says.

"Mine contaminant releases can affect natural resources such as air, soil and water quality as well as plant and animal health. The responsibility to reclaim dangerous Abandoned Mine Land sites is resource intensive and requires cooperation with local, state and federal partners."

Even dangerous mines that have been sealed sometime are vandalized and left open, and sites are "prone to erosion and destabilization."

The U.S. Geological Survey has conducted research on the problem.

Jewell will emphasize in her testimony that "the public often is left with the bill for remediation of legacy abandoned mines, rather than the companies and individuals who originally developed the resources."

The White House proposal for a fee, included in recent budget requests, "would hold the hardrock mining industry responsible for the remediation of abandoned hardrock mines."

"It is unfortunate that the catalyst to address a problem is often an incident like this," Jewell is to testify, referring to the Gold King disaster. The Interior Department "stands ready to work with the committee and Congress to address the issue in a meaningful way."

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