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EPA knew of 'blowout' risk for tainted water at gold mine

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By MICHAEL BIESECKER

WASHINGTON (AP) — Internal documents released late Friday show managers at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency were aware of the potential for a catastrophic "blowout" at an abandoned mine that could release "large volumes" of wastewater laced with toxic heavy metals.

EPA released the documents following weeks of prodding from The Associated Press and other media organizations. EPA and contract workers accidentally unleashed 3 million gallons of contaminated wastewater on Aug. 5 as they inspected the idled Gold King Mine near Silverton, Colorado.

Among the documents is a June 2014 work order for a planned cleanup that noted that the old mine had not been accessible since 1995, when the entrance partially collapsed. The plan appears to have been produced by Environmental Restoration, a private contractor working for EPA.

"This condition has likely caused impounding of water behind the collapse," the report says. "In addition, other collapses within the workings may have occurred creating additional water impounding conditions. Conditions may exist that could result in a blowout of the blockages and cause a release of large volumes of contaminated mine waters and sediment from inside the mine, which contain concentrated heavy metals."



(AP) In this Aug. 18, 2015 photo, Joe Ben Jr., Shiprock Chapter House Farm Board...

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A subsequent May 2015 action plan for the mine also notes the potential for a blowout.

There are at least three ongoing investigations into exactly how EPA triggered the disaster, which tainted rivers in Colorado, New Mexico and Utah with lead, arsenic and other contaminants. EPA says its water testing has shown contamination levels have since fallen back to pre-spill levels, though experts warn the heavy metals have likely sunk and mixed with bottom sediments that could someday be stirred back up.

The documents, which the agency released about 10:30 p.m. eastern time, do not include any account of what happened immediately before or after the spill. The wastewater flowed into a tributary of the Animas and San Juan rivers, turning them a sickly yellow.

Elected officials in affected states and elsewhere have been highly critical of the EPA's initial response. Among the unanswered questions is why it took the agency nearly a day to inform local officials in downstream communities that rely on the rivers for drinking water.

Much of the text in the documents released Friday was redacted by EPA officials. Among the items blacked out is the line in a 2013 safety plan for the Gold King job that specifies whether workers were required to have phones that could work at the remote site, which is more than 11,000 feet up a mountain.

EPA did not immediately respond Friday night to questions from the AP. In the wake of the spill, it has typically taken days to get any detailed response from the agency, if at all.



(AP) In this Aug. 12, 2015 file photo, water flows through a series of retention...

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On its website, contractor Environmental Restoration posted a brief statement last week confirming its employees were present at the mine when the spill occurred. The company declined to provide more detail, saying that to do so would violate "contractual confidentiality obligations."

The EPA has not yet provided a copy of its contact with the firm. On the March 2015 cost estimate for the work released Friday, the agency blacked out all the dollar figures.

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