


Study: Risk of mining pollution was ignored

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By John Miller

BOISE (AP) — An environmental group Thursday renewed its fight against the planned expansion of phosphate mines on public land in Southeast Idaho, accusing federal agencies and the chemical industry of covering up the dangers of toxic selenium pollution from leaking mining waste.

The Greater Yellowstone Coalition released a 17-page report it says shows companies and government officials "imperiled the region's water quality and its natural resources" by ignoring or dismissing evidence of selenium pollution well before a 1996 livestock poisoning alerted the public to problems.


The report comes  weeks before the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are due to release a final environmental impact statement that J.R. Simplot Co. must get before it can expand its Smoky Canyon mine, located in Caribou County. Monsanto Co.'s proposed new Blackfoot Bridge mine, near Soda Springs, is also under federal review.

As Simplot and Monsanto try to bolster phosphate extraction to fuel their agricultural fertilizer operations, foes argue that 17 phosphate mines in Southeast Idaho that are now under federal Superfund authority should be cleaned up before any new projects get approval.



e agencies and the companies must come forward, take responsibility for the selenium problem, and fully clean up polluted mines before any more permits are issued," said Coby Tigert, of the Caribou Clean Water Partnership that's allied with the Bozeman, Mont.-based Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

Selenium is needed in trace amounts for good health, but large quantities can cause liver disease and death.

In December 1996, five horses grazing on private land downstream from one of Southeast Idaho's more than 30 phosphate mine sites were poisoned with selenium and had to be destroyed. A year later, more horses and hundreds of sheep also died not far from another phosphate mine near Soda Springs.

Edgar Imhoff, a Virginia based hydrologist and mining expert who duced the report, said he reviewed thousands of pages of documents from the BLM, Forest Service and Environmental Protection Agency.

His conclusion: Claims by chemical companies, the Forest Service and BLM that it took the livestock poisonings to make them aware of dangers from mining-related selenium are disingenuous. They knew of them long before, he said.


"There is evidence that, by the late 1980s, the phosphate industry was fully aware of the potential for selenium contamination from sphorous slag generated in Southeast Idaho in the processing of phosphate ore," Imhoff wrote, adding the same goes for the agencies. " claim of being unaware until 1997 of the toxic effects of selenium due to mining and primitive reclamation at the Smoky Canyon Mine ... does not wash."

Federal officials with the BLM and Forest Service hadn't seen Imhoff's report when contacted by The Associated Press.

Still, they rejected claims they ignored problems or colluded with the mining industry.

Bill Stout, the BLM's Pocatello field office geologist, said the environmental impact statement being prepared for Simplot's Smoky Canyon mine expansion is likely to be released within the next few weeks. After it's made public, there will be a period where opponents can lodge an appeal.

"The EIS describes the proposed actions, mitigation and alternatives, and expected impacts," said Stout, who worked on the document. "We describe the project in the EIS and certain mitigation measures in the EIS. That's what Simplot has to comply with."

Simplot wants to expand its Smoky Canyon mine because there are er than five years of ore left within the existing site. The mine is now the sole supplier for the agriculture conglomerate's 63-year-old Don fertilizer plant in Pocatello. Together, the mine and fertilizer plant employ more than 500 people, and Rick Phillips, a spokesman for the company, says the proposed expansion would provide enough additional phosphate to keep them working through nearly 2025.

The company hadn't reviewed claims from Imhoff's report, he said.

"I haven't seen what their allegations say," Phillips said, while contending the debate about selenium, especially since the horses and sheep died in 1996 and 1997, has been open and robust. "I'm not sure how allegations of a conspiracy fit into that."