

LEADVILLE JOURNAL

Mine Water Poses Danger of a Toxic Gusher



Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

Emily Medina, center, with two other residents of Leadville, Colo., who gathered last week for the testing of an alarm system.

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Published: February 28, 2008

LEADVILLE, Colo. — In a snowswept trailer park, Emily Medina wakes each morning wondering whether she will be washed away by toxic water that local officials fear could burst from a decaying mine tunnel near her home.

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Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

Abandoned equipment stands in the snow near the top of an underground tunnel that was once used to drain mine water.



The New York Times

Leadville, Colo., is a historic former mining town.

Like many of the 2,800 people in this old mining town, where wealthy prospectors and infamous gunslingers once flocked, Ms. Medina, a housekeeper at a hotel in Vail, is afraid of losing her property, or worse.

“They should get us out of here,” she said. “They need to do something before it’s too late.”

This month, Lake County commissioners declared a state of emergency over concerns that rising levels of contaminated water could burst from the Leadville Mine Drainage Tunnel and flood the town.

For years, the federal Bureau of Reclamation and the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) have bickered over what to do about the aging tunnel, which stretches 2.1 miles and has become dammed by debris. The debris is holding back more than a billion gallons of water, much of it tainted with toxic levels of cadmium, zinc and manganese.

The threat posed by the tunnel is the latest misfortune for the town, which is grappling with the wreckage of more than a century of mining.

“Everybody made a lot of money in Leadville,” said Ken Olsen, a county commissioner. “They left years ago, and we’ve had to clean up after them ever since.”

In the late 1800s, a gold and silver boom made Leadville one of [Colorado](#)'s most colorful places, drawing the likes of the Guggenheims. Legend has it that Doc Holliday fought his final gunfight here.

Gold and silver gave way to zinc and lead mining, encouraged by the federal government for the war effort during World War II and the Korean War. Molybdenum, used to fortify steel, was blasted out of the mountains for years at the Climax mine.

In 1983, the E.P.A. listed the area as a Superfund site because of mine tailings and runoff. Three years later, after a sharp decline in the price of molybdenum, the Climax mine shut down, stripping Leadville of its heart.

“So many people had to leave the community,” said Bob Elder, a retired mining engineer. “A lot of us felt lost. There was no life left here for quite a while.”

The town has recast itself as a tourist destination — North America's highest incorporated city, at 10,152 feet, where people can peruse its tiny Victorian-style main street, drink at the Silver Dollar Saloon or ride a scenic railroad. Miners have been replaced by Mexican immigrants, who commute over the mountains to work at ski resorts.

Abandoned mine shafts honeycomb the surrounding hillsides. The old drainage tunnel, built by the federal government in 1943 to drain hundreds of these shafts, began falling apart in the 1970s, causing water to pool. In 2005, the E.P.A. offered to start pumping the clogged water toward a Bureau of Reclamation plant, which treats the water flowing through the tunnel; but the bureau contended that the additional water was part of the E.P.A.'s Superfund cleanup responsibility. A plan for the state to take over the plant subsequently fell through.

Last year, the warnings grew louder. Brad Littlepage, who manages the Bureau of Reclamation treatment plant, says he told supervisors,

to no avail, about the tunnel's deterioration. The risk, as he and other experts saw it, was that pressure from the backed-up water had become so intense that it threatened to burst through the blockages and cascade out of the tunnel.

A spokesman for the Bureau of Reclamation, Peter Soeth, said that Mr. Littlepage's concerns had been considered but that the agency's experts had concluded that the tunnel's condition did not pose an immediate threat.

Last November, Robert E. Robert, a regional administrator for the E.P.A., sent a letter to the bureau warning of the possibility of a "potentially catastrophic release of water" from the tunnel.

Since May 2005, the level of water has risen 50 feet, creating a pool that is now 150 feet deep, said Jord Gertson, a hydrogeologist who works for the E.P.A.

A substantial snowpack this winter has put even more pressure on the tunnel.

For the Lake County commissioners, the bureaucratic wrangling had gone on long enough. The commissioners' state of emergency declaration on Feb. 13 brought a visit from Senator [Ken Salazar](#), a letter from Gov. Bill Ritter Jr. to President Bush and a hearing last week at the State Capitol. Despite the frustration, Mayor Bud Elliott worries that the attention will harm Leadville's economy. Two days after the county's declaration, the town was notified that its property and liability insurance would not be renewed because it had become too risky, Mr. Elliott said.

"People are canceling vacations," he said. "We've had two children withdrawn from school because their parents are afraid."

The E.P.A. has since agreed to spend \$1.5 million to drill into the tunnel and begin pumping the water into the Bureau of Reclamation's treatment facility.

One frigid evening last week, a test of emergency sirens rang out through the trailer park where Ms. Medina and 300 other people live. Shania Sooter, 9, clasped her hands to her ears. “They’re going to show us what to do in case there’s a flood from the mine,” she said.

As a muffled recording broadcast warnings in English and Spanish, a herd of elk wandered down from the mountains. Down the road, peering out from behind the peaks, the yellow lights from the old Climax mine continued to burn through the night.