

## OPENING STATEMENT

Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)  
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

“Holding EPA Accountable for Polluting Western Waters”  
Full Committee Hearing

September 9, 2015

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the fact we are holding this hearing today. The August 5<sup>th</sup> release of three million gallons of wastewater from the Gold King mine in Silverton, Colorado into the Animas River was an unfortunate accident.

I believe it is important to understand what happened on August 5<sup>th</sup> and why, and explore what lessons we can learn from this event. However, we should also take this opportunity to highlight the inherently dirty, dangerous, and environmentally damaging process of metal mining. Before this accident occurred, Gold King and a handful of other mines in the area were releasing more than 300 million gallons of acid mine waste into the Animas Watershed annually. Over the area’s 120-year history of mining operations more than 17.2 billion pounds of mining and milling by-products containing toxic chemicals were released into this waterway.

Unfortunately, residents of San Juan County are well aware that August 5<sup>th</sup> was not the first time the Animas River changed color. In the 1970s mine accidents poured millions of gallons of wastewater into the river. Sadly, acid mine drainage in this area is routine and the occasional large scale release of waste water due to accidents at mine sites is an all-too common occurrence.

I’d like to *show a photograph* that ran in *The Durango Herald* newspaper in 2012 that shows toxic wastewater flowing from the American Tunnel three years *before* the recent accident at the Gold King mine. This *second picture* was taken below the Red and Bonita Mine, and the wastewater is draining into Cement Creek, a tributary that feeds into the Animas River. This photograph was taken in 2013.



*This* was one of the key reasons the EPA was at the Gold King mine site on August 5<sup>th</sup>. They were there attempting to investigate this long-standing problem of persistent acid mine drainage

into the Animas Watershed from the Gold King and neighboring interconnected mines. EPA was also attempting to alleviate what was seen as an “inevitable” “blowout” at the Gold King mine due to a buildup of drainage water that may have been caused by the closure of the American Tunnel, a mine drainage system, at the nearby Sunnyside Mine. Unfortunately, they were obviously unsuccessful in trying to prevent a blowout from occurring.

These next **two photos** show the discoloration of the Animas River immediately after the August 5<sup>th</sup> accident.



And these next **two photos** show what the Animas River looked like on August 12<sup>th</sup> and August 14<sup>th</sup>, seven and nine days after the Gold King mine accident.



Fortunately, the metal concentrations in the water that led to the discoloration of the Animas River quickly returned to “pre-incident” levels. I am not discounting the significance of the August 5<sup>th</sup> event at the Gold King mine or its potential environmental impact, but it is important to understand that the issue of mine drainage into the Animas Watershed did not begin last month.

The EPA was acting as an environmental firefighter when they went to the Gold King mine. They were attempting to damp down a raging environmental hazard that had endangered the Animas Watershed for decades. Unfortunately, when they opened an exploratory hole the buildup of wastewater drainage was too much to effectively control.

I hope that our witnesses, particularly Mayor Dean Brookie, the Mayor of Durango, Colorado, located 50 miles downstream from the Gold King and hundreds of other inactive mine sites, can

help address both the events leading up to the August 5<sup>th</sup> blowout at the Gold King mine, the legacy of metal mining operations on the Animas Watershed and useful next steps to consider in helping to prevent further environmental degradation in this truly beautiful region of our nation.

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I yield back.