

NATIONAL PRIORITIES LIST (NPL)

Final Site

September 2011

NEW IDRIA MERCURY MINE | Idria, California San Benito County

Site Location:

The site is an abandoned mercury mine located in the town of Idria in San Benito County, 64 miles southeast of Hollister.

Site History:

The site was the second most productive mercury mine in North America, operating from approximately 1854 to 1972.

Site Contamination/Contaminants:

Extensive waste rock and calcine tailings piles cover more than 40 acres of the site. Untreated acid mine drainage (AMD) currently discharges from an adit at the site at a rate between 10 and 50 gallons per minute. The AMD flows directly over waste rock and tailings piles into San Carlos Creek. Mercury from the mine wastes at the site is transported via San Carlos Creek to Silver Creek and into Panoche Creek. Mercury levels in San Carlos Creek downstream from the site are above background and exceed the criterion continuous concentration (CCC) for mercury in surface water according to EPA's National Recommended Water Quality Criteria. The CCC is national guidance and is an estimate of the highest concentration of mercury in surface water to which an aquatic community can be exposed indefinitely without resulting in an unacceptable impact. It is likely that mercury is further transported down the watershed to the Mendota Pool, the San Joaquin River, and ultimately to the San Francisco Bay.

Potential Impacts on Surrounding Community/Environment:

Over 20 miles of wetlands, located along San Carlos and Silver Creeks, are documented to be impacted with mercury. The aquatic and wetland habitats associated with these creeks are of regional ecological significance. This wetland area is only one of a few flowing east to the San Joaquin Valley from the 200-mile-long Diablo Range. There are federally endangered species in the vicinity of the site and wetlands areas.

Response Activities (to date):

The Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) prescribed waste discharge requirements for the New Idria Mine for the discharge of mill waste, mine water and sewage effluent to San Carlos Creek in 1970. In 1975 and in 1988, the RWQCB found the mine to be in violation of the requirements. RWQCB was further involved in the site in 2003, and conducted an inspection, analyzing eight water samples, confirming the impact the site has on San Carlos Creek. In the mid 1980s, Futures Foundation, a drug rehabilitation program, purchased the property and began dumping waste on the surface of the tailings piles. The California Integrated Waste Management Board and California Department of Toxic Substances Control, working in conjunction with EPA and the San Benito County Health and Human Services Agency, were able to have the waste materials removed from the site in February 2003.

Need for NPL Listing:

A thorough investigation and long-term remedial action is necessary to address the site contamination, which poses a significant risk to endangered and threatened species and a unique wetland environment. Other federal and state cleanup programs were evaluated, but are not viable at this time. EPA received a letter of support for placing the site on the NPL from the state.

[The description of the site (release) is based on information available at the time the site was evaluated with the HRS. The description may change as additional information is gathered on the sources and extent of contamination.]