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## Superfund site work progresses with no end in site

By Scott Murphy, Tribune News Service

Cleaning a six-mile-long creek isn't easy.

In fact, after more than 15 years of research, including three years of intensive temporary water treatment project, a complete plan on how to clean up Leviathan Mine is still about four years away.

But the temporary work under way at Leviathan Mine is improving water clarity and Leviathan Creek is again host to tiny bugs -- known as macro-invertebrate samples to scientists -- according to California state and federal officials.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency and the California Regional Water Quality Board hosted a public tour of the federal Leviathan Superfund Site and impacted nearby creeks Wednesday.

The mine is located about six miles east of Markleeville, Calif., and about 25 miles southwest of Gardnerville.

About 55 people, mainly Alpine County residents and various engineers, toured the sun-soaked mountainside cleanup sites.

Holding a rock about four miles downstream from the water treatment facility on the bank of Leviathan Creek, EPA ecologist Ned Black said small insect larvae are "starting to make a living" in



the stream.

For years, no insect life, much less fish, could live in the acidic water.

However, the creek and the creek it feeds, Bryant Creek, are starting to clarify and improve, Black said.

Leviathan Creek used to look like a "yellow stripe" on the hillside, Black said.

Now, the creek looks like a rusty stream of vegetable soup, but that's caused mainly by polluted sediment in the creek bed. The water is getting clearer.

That's because of the "temporary fix" upstream near the site of the 50-acre open pit mine, said EPA project manager Kevin Mayer.

The California Regional Water Quality Board's Chris Stetler is leading a temporary water treatment project near the mine site that could be part of the long-term solution.

No date has been determined regarding the number of years it will take to finish the project. Estimates range from 10 to 50 years.

A long-term plan is still about four years from completion.

Meanwhile, Stetler and his workers have built several retention ponds atop tailings piles.

The ponds and their accompanying drainage system are working to improve the clarity of Leviathan Creek.

Precipitation that falls into a large pit where mining took place in the Superfund site is flowed into a retention pond and treated before flowing into the creek.

High levels of acidity, about as acidic as lemonade, are removed and the water is ultimately flowed back into Leviathan Creek.

Stetler is trying to treat all the contaminated water and said there's no longer any polluted overflow from the pond going into the creek.

However, controlling underwater springs and seeps from picking up contaminant and flowing into the

creek is still a problem, said Atlantic Richfield Company's project manager, Steve Ferry.

Ferry's crew works at another pond and removed salt into giant brown bags from polluted water.

Atlantic Richfield Company is liable for environmental damage and helps pay for the cleanup because it bought Anaconda Mining Company, the owners of the Leviathan site in the 1950s and 1960s.

The site was supposedly sold in the 1960s for \$1 to an Alpine County resident, Stetler said.

Leviathan Mine began in the 1860s as a copper sulfate mine, which was used in mining at the Comstock Lode in Virginia City.

The mine was dormant until about the the 1930s when sulphur and copper were mined.

Between 1952 and 1962, the sulphur was transported to Montana to help mining projects there, according to a Leviathan Mine history provided by the California Regional Water Quality Board.

The state of California bought the site in January 1984.

Several residents of Gardnerville and Markleeville, Calif., work at the mine cleanup site.

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