

Drumlummon Mine's water discharge permit elicits few calls for oversight

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Only three people offered comments at a sparsely attended meeting Tuesday night over a proposal to allow the Drumlummon Mine to discharge water with low levels of nitrates via an underground pipe into Silver Creek.

Karen Marble, a Helena resident who also owns a home in Marysville, said she's mostly concerned that the permit to discharge to surface waters will include quarterly self-monitoring by Drumlummon employees. She noted that "discrepancies" have been found in what mine officials said and what the actual flow of water was in Silver Creek, and she added that the company initially disputed that there is a hydraulic connection between the groundwater and the stream.

"They denied that for almost a year and we knew it was true," Marble said. "I just think DEQ (the Montana Department of Environmental Quality) should be monitoring the mine more often, especially if this permit gets approved.

"If the mine can do this right, then great. But I just want it done correctly for public health and safety."

Marysville resident Earl Fred said he seconded Marble's comments.

Carson Davis, another Marysville resident, also asked for additional oversight of the mine. He noted that as a longtime plumber, his work is always inspected by someone appointed by the state. He also wanted to make sure that any water-dispersing system be engineered, not just created by "some guy who comes in and says it will work."

"I hope the state has some sort of procedure put together by a mechanical engineer or some sort of engineer and the state has some qualified inspector to make sure everything is installed correctly," Davis said.

Mining operations began at the Drumlummon Mine site in the 1880s. It became one of the largest underground mines in the West, producing gold and silver worth millions of dollars. It was last mined in the 1950s, then closed until Drumlummon Gold Corporation — formerly RX Gold and Silver — began exploration work in 2008.

The lower tunnels of the historic mine were flooded with groundwater over the decades, and the water became contaminated with arsenic. To get to those deep tunnels, the company is pumping the water through a treatment system that removes the arsenic, then sending it through a 3,600-foot-long perforated pipe buried about 3 feet underground in an old railroad bed. The pipe parallels Silver Creek about 300 to 500 feet from the stream.

When it was installed, the pipe was wrapped in a fiber membrane to keep dirt and debris from clogging the holes. However, that acted as a seal on the pipe, so it was just discharging on the end.

Drumlummon workers excavated the pipes, took the membrane off, and reburied it this summer.

But through its own tests the company also found that the discharged water from the mine was flowing underground and into Silver Creek. In addition, it discovered low levels of nitrates – which typically come from blasting inside the mine – in the discharged water.

Increased levels of nitrates can aid in the formation of algae in the creek. State officials said they don't believe it presents a human health risk, and note that Silver Creek already is listed as an impaired stream due to high levels of mercury in the soils from historic mining activities. A health advisory recommends that people shouldn't eat fish caught in the creek, since they've been found to have elevated mercury levels.

Still, as part of the surface water discharge permit, Drumlummon is required to lower the nitrate levels in the discharged water.

The DEQ determined that Drumlummon's discharge of industrial waste to Silver Creek is in violation of the Montana Water Quality Act, according to documents included in its permit application. However, no penalties have been assessed at this time.

Drumlummon Gold Corporation is operating now under a temporary surface water discharge permit. The permit application, along with other related documents, is available online at <http://deq.mt.gov/notices/WQnotices.mcp>

Public comments will be accepted until 5 p.m. Sept. 19 and can be emailed to WPBPublicNotices@mt.gov or by regular mail to DEQ Permitting and Compliance Division, Water Protection Bureau, P.O. Box 200901, Helena, MT 59620.

Tom Reid, the hearings examiner at Tuesday night's meeting, said they've only received one comment so far.

"But people have until next week to get them in, and my expectation is they'll all come in at the last minute," Reid said.