

**TESTIMONY  
OF  
GWEN ALEXANDRA LACHELT  
BEFORE THE  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCES  
MAY 9, 2019**

Thank you Chairman Grijalva, Chairman Lowenthal, Ranking Member Gosar and Members of the Committee, for inviting me to testify today. My name is Gwen Alexandra Lachelt, and I am a county commissioner from La Plata County, Colorado. In 2015, polluted water spilled out of the Gold King mine turning the Animas River — the lifeblood of our corner of southwest Colorado - a toxic orange.

Three million gallons of acidic waste laden with arsenic, lead and other harmful contaminants spilled out of the inactive gold mine, flowing directly into the Animas River. The people of southwest Colorado rely on the river for drinking water, to irrigate fields, to sustain wildlife and to support a lucrative outdoor recreation industry.

1872 Mining Law reform, and the reclamation fund it would create, would help communities like mine clean up the hundreds of thousands of abandoned hardrock mines that litter the West. To date, there is still no comprehensive inventory of abandoned hardrock mines, no system to prioritize clean-up of the most dangerous of these mines, and almost no funds to pay for it. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), estimated clean-up costs total approximately \$50 billion.

La Plata County is not alone in feeling the impacts of abandoned mines. The hardrock mining industry is the country's largest source of toxic pollution, according to the EPA's Toxic Release Inventory. And because the 150-year-old Mining Law continues to govern the industry in the 21st century, both abandoned and operating mines leave behind environmental, public health and economic devastation that taxpayers must pay for and communities must endure.

Just last week, the Blue River that flows through Breckenridge, Colorado, turned orange because recent precipitation mobilized runoff from an abandoned mine upstream. One of the biggest concerns following the river's dramatic change in color this weekend has been about the safety of drinking water supplies, given that hundreds of thousands of people living on the Front Range rely on Dillon Reservoir, which is downstream from the pollution.

Communities across the country rely on their rivers the way we rely on the Animas. Our health and prosperity depend on clean water. Reforming the 1872 Mining Law to bring it into the modern age can help us clean up old mine sites and safeguard our precious water resources from future mine disasters.

The time to change U.S. mining policy is long overdue. The General Mining Law that governs today's mining industry was signed into law more than 147 years ago, when miners worked with hammer and chisel — a far cry from the modern mines that can decimate entire watersheds.

We have an opportunity to make sure that there is never another Gold King Mine spill. By reforming the 1872 Mining Law, we not only create a robust reclamation fund to clean up old mines, we also create jobs.

An Abandoned Mine Land (AML) reclamation program with a significant, dedicated funding source can act as an economic driver. Across the country, the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act's (SMCRA) AML program has reclaimed over \$5.7 billion worth of mine pollution and nearly 800,000 acres of damaged land and water. This work cannot be outsourced. The program delivered a total impact of \$778 million to the U.S. economy in FY2013, and supported 4,761 jobs across the country, 1,317 of which were in Central Appalachian states.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that for each \$1 million spent on mine cleanup, 14 to 33 new jobs are created. In Ohio, SMCRA coal reclamation funds generated 10 jobs per million dollars invested. Between 2008 and 2013, federal funding to the AML Program generated more than \$1.8 million in Ohio state and local tax revenue. Stream restoration has a positive economic impact as well. In West Virginia, estimated benefits from restoration of Deckers Creek total about \$1.9 million annually.

Without 1872 Mining Law reform, we simply don't have enough money to pay for mine cleanup and spill prevention for the hundreds of thousands of abandoned and inactive mines that litter our country. The public and the environment have paid the price for too long. Western communities and water resources need Congress to act now to protect our important water resources.

Thank you.