

Statement of Senator James M. Inhofe

Hearing on “**Oversight of the Cause, Response, and Impacts of
EPA’s Gold King Mine Spill.**”

U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works

September 16, 2015

Today’s oversight hearing is on the cause, response, and impacts of last month’s blowout at the Gold King mine in Colorado. The spill, which occurred when an EPA contractor poked a hole through the collapsed mine entrance, released more than 3 million gallons of contaminated mine water into the Cement Creek and Animus River. A yellow plume of contaminated water traveled as far as the San Juan River in New Mexico and southern Utah and affected drinking water supplies, recreation, agriculture, and wildlife along the way.

At the time of the spill, EPA’s contractor was investigating the amount of water that had pooled behind the collapsed entrance to the Gold King mine. EPA authorized this investigation as part of a cleanup action under the Superfund law to address acid mine drainage from the nearby abandoned Red and Bonita mine.

Based on the Committee’s oversight to date, it is clear EPA knew that there was likely to be a significant amount of water behind the collapsed Gold King mine entrance and that there was a risk of a blowout. Given

these facts, it is unclear why EPA and the contractor did not exercise more care when working at the Gold King site. EPA has said that it has already spent \$8 million responding to the spill.

Thankfully, no one was killed or injured by the blowout, but a number of important questions remain unanswered about what led to the spill and how EPA responded.

Since the spill, EPA has conducted a preliminary evaluation of the causes and has asked the Department of the Interior to conduct an independent investigation and report its findings later next month. But I question whether the Interior Department has the independence and expertise necessary to conduct this review. The EPA Office of Inspector General is also conducting a review of the spill.

Before we begin, I would like to welcome Senators Gardner, Bennett, Heinrich, and Udall and thank them for requesting this important hearing. I look forward to hearing their statements on how this spill has affected their states and constituents.

I would also like to thank Administrator McCarthy for agreeing to testify today. It is important that we hear directly from EPA's top official about what caused this spill and what EPA has learned from this tragedy.

Finally, I would like to note that the area where the blowout occurred is in a historic mining district near Silverton, Colorado, where local groups have been working with the State of Colorado and EPA to address the

impacts of acid mine drainage from this and other abandoned mine sites for a number of years.

When I was chairman of this Committee in 2006, we passed a bipartisan bill that would have promoted the cleanup of these sites by Good Samaritans. In the years since, this issue has received little attention from Congress or this Committee, but as Chairman for a second time I again look forward to working with my colleagues from Colorado and New Mexico as they contemplate new legislative proposals.