U.S. EPA recovers $721,000 for cleanup of abandoned mine site

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Contact Information: Marc Mowrey, (415) 972-3324

SAN FRANCISCO – The U.S. Environmental Protection agency announced that it has reached a settlement with Alpheus Kaplan, Nehemiah Development Company, and eleven other parties to pay $721,000 in EPA costs to cleanup the Central Eureka Mine, an abandoned gold mine site in Amador County, Calif.

The defendants were responsible for moving arsenic-laden waste from previous mining operations onto subdivided properties and, in many cases, constructing homes and other dwellings directly on the contaminated mine tailings.

“We pursue financial settlements such as this one to recover the costs EPA spends to cleanup sites,” said Keith Takata, director of the Superfund division in EPA’s Pacific Southwest region. “This settlement will bring valuable resources to help finance future cleanups.”

The site, known as the Central Eureka Mine, operated as a gold mine intermittently from 1855 to 1958. During that time, the mine produced enough arsenic-laden waste to cover 31 acres of land. During the late 1970s and 1980s, Kaplan, Nehemiah and others purchased the land on or adjacent to the contaminated mine tailings and engaged in development activities on those lands.

Arsenic is a known human carcinogen. Arsenic can enter a person’s system by the accidental ingestion of small amounts of dust or dirt, a common occurrence for kids playing outside. Skin cancer can result or, in the case of inhaling arsenic-laden dust, lung cancer.

By 1995, aware of and concerned about the risks posed by elevated arsenic levels in the soil to residents living in the subdivisions, the EPA issued two Administrative Orders to force responsible parties to remove the contaminated soils.

The EPA subsequently spent approximately $4 million between 1995 and 2001 to clean up the mine site, primarily by capping the mine tailings pile so contamination would not seep out. Besides the $721,000 settlement, Kaplan/Nehemiah has already spent approximately $300,000 in cleanup actions at the site since 1995.

In a separate agreement, another defendant in the same case, Honeywell International Inc., has agreed to pay the EPA $2 million. This is in addition to several million dollars Honeywell and its predecessor, Allied Signal Inc., spent in cleanup actions at the site since 1995.

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