

Calif. water at-risk from abandoned Sierra Nevada mines

By Ed Joyce, California Public Radio

Along the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada, runoff pollution from abandoned mines in “Gold Country” could threaten California’s primary water supply. A pilot project at one mine site is intended to prevent contaminated runoff from reaching the Yuba River.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy said more than 60 percent of California’s water supply comes from forests in the Sierra Nevada. The state agency says the health of many of those forests is in decline.

Joan Keegan, Conservancy assistant executive officer, said abandoned mines with contaminated soil are a “huge problem.”



The Sierra Nevada Conservancy is working to reduce runoff from an abandoned mine in Nevada County.

Photo/Bob Kingman/Sierra Nevada Conservancy

“There are 47,000 abandoned mine lands in California that have

been inventoried and over half of those are in the Sierra Nevada,” said Keegan. “And of those, there are 3,000 that are known to contain chemical hazards, including mercury.”

Keegan said there are probably more mines in the Sierra Nevada with chemical hazards that haven’t been assessed.

She said contaminated soil from abandoned mines drains in waterways that flow to the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

“Basically, a lot of the mercury and other toxins, that are a result of abandoned mine lands in the Sierra, have and continue to make their way downstream into the Delta,” said Keegan.

Keegan said the majority of those abandoned mines are in “Gold County” including El Dorado and Placer counties.

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