

Probe finds EPA error caused mine spill

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Government investigators squarely blamed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday for a 3 million-gallon wastewater spill from a Colorado gold mine, saying an EPA cleanup crew rushed its work and failed to consider the complex engineering involved, triggering the very blowout it hoped to avoid.



AP Photo/Brennan Linsley, file

In this Aug. 12 file photo, water flows through a series of retention ponds built to contain and filter out heavy metals and chemicals from the Gold King mine chemical accident, in the spillway about 1/4 mile downstream from the mine, outside Silverton, Colo.

The spill that fouled rivers in three states would have been avoided had the EPA team checked on water levels inside the Gold King Mine before digging into a collapsed and leaking mine entrance, Interior Department investigators concluded.

The technical report on the causes of the Aug. 5 spill has implications across the United States, where similar disasters could lurk among an estimated hundreds of thousands of abandoned mines that have yet to be cleaned up. The total cost of containing this mining industry mess could top \$50 billion, according to government estimates.

The root causes of the Colorado accident began decades ago, when mining companies altered the flow of water through a series of interconnected tunnels in the extensively mined Upper Animas River watershed, the

report says.

EPA documents show its officials knew of the potential for a major blowout from the Gold King Mine near Silverton as early as June 2014. After the spill, EPA officials described the blowout as “likely inevitable” because millions of gallons of pressurized water had been bottling up inside the mine.

The Interior report directly refutes that assertion. It says the cleanup team could have used a drill rig to bore into the mine tunnel from above, safely gauging the danger of a blowout and planning the excavation accordingly.

Instead, the EPA crew, with the agreement of Colorado mining officials, assumed the mine was only partially inundated.

“This error resulted in development of a plan to open the mine in a manner that appeared to guard against blowout, but instead led directly to the failure,” according to engineers from Interior’s Bureau of Reclamation, who spent two months evaluating the accident.

The blowout tainted rivers in Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and on the Navajo Nation with dangerous heavy metals including arsenic.

Facing GOP queries, Clinton seeks to close book on Benghazi

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Hillary Rodham Clinton strove to close the book on the worst episode of her tenure as secretary of state Thursday, battling hours of Republican questions in a hearing that grew contentious but revealed little new about the 2012 attacks in Benghazi, Libya. She firmly defended her record while seeking to avoid any mishap that might damage her presidential campaign.



AP Photo/Evan Vucci

Democratic presidential candidate, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton listens as she testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, Thursday.

Pressed about events before and after the deaths of four Americans, Clinton had confrontational exchanges with several GOP lawmakers but also fielded supportive queries from Democrats. The most combative moments focused on accusations about the Obama administration’s shifting early public accounts of the attacks.

However, five hours into the hearing, Republicans had yet to ask the Democratic presidential front-runner a single question about the night of Sept. 11, 2012, itself.

The committee’s chairman, Trey Gowdy, portrayed the panel as focused on the facts after comments by fellow Republicans describing it as an effort designed to hurt Clinton’s presidential bid. Democrats have pounced on those earlier remarks and have pointed out that the probe has now cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$4.5 million and, after 17 months, has lasted longer than the 1970s Watergate investigation.

Gowdy, a former federal prosecutor, said the Republicans’ efforts were not a prosecution.

Contradicting him, Rep. Adam Smith, a Democrat from Washington, told Clinton: “The purpose of this committee is to prosecute you.”

In one tense moment, Republican Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio accused Clinton of deliberately misleading the public by linking the Benghazi violence at first to an Internet video insulting the Muslim Prophet Muhammad.

Clinton, stone-faced for much of the hearing, smiled in bemusement as Jordan cut her off from answering. Eventually given the chance to comment, she said only that “some” people had wanted to use the video to justify the attack that killed Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans, and that she rejected that justification.

The argument went to the origins of the disagreement over Benghazi and how President Barack Obama and his top aides represented the attack in the final weeks of his re-election campaign. And it reflected some of the raw emotion the deadly violence continues to provoke, something Clinton will have to face over the next year of her White House bid even if the Republican-led special investigation loses steam.

For Clinton, the political theater offered opportunity and potential pitfalls. It gave her a high-profile platform to show her self-control and command of foreign policy. But it also left her vulnerable to claims that she helped politicize the Benghazi tragedy.

“There were probably a number of different motivations” for the attack, Clinton said, describing a time when competing strands of intelligence were being received and no clear picture had yet emerged. Speaking directly to Jordan, she said: “The insinuations that you are making do a great disservice”

to the diplomats and others involved.

“I’m sorry that it doesn’t fit your narrative. I can only tell you what the facts were,” Clinton said.

There were no gaffes for Clinton and — beyond that exchange — few heated interactions. She never raised her voice as she had at a Senate hearing on Benghazi in January 2013, when she shouted: “What difference, at this point, does it make?” Given that Republicans campaigned off that oft-repeated sound bite, the lack of an indelible image from Thursday’s hearing will have suited Clinton’s campaign fine.

Instead, it was the panel’s members who engaged among themselves in the nastiest fight, with Clinton merely observing. Democrats pressed for the release of the full transcript of a Clinton adviser’s private testimony, drawing Gowdy of South Carolina, into an angry debate. The panel eventually voted against the release, all Democrats in favor, Republicans against.

Gowdy, a former federal prosecutor, said an important question remains unanswered: Why were security requests denied? why was the military not ready to respond quickly on the 11th anniversary of 9/11 and why did the Obama administration change its story about the nature of the attacks in the weeks afterward?

Nurse quarantined over Ebola fears sues Gov. Christie

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — A nurse who had contact with Ebola patients in West Africa and was quarantined at a New Jersey hospital when she returned sued Gov. Chris Christie and state health officials on Thursday, saying they illegally held her against her will.

The American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey and a New York firm filed the federal civil rights lawsuit in Newark for Kaci Hickox. Besides Christie, the lawsuit names as defendants former state health commissioner Mary O’Dowd and other health department employees.

The lawsuit seeks at least \$250,000 in compensatory and punitive damages, and Hickox’s lawyers say they

hope the case will change a quarantine policy they allege was driven by politics, not by public health concerns.

Hickox, 34, was working with Doctors Without Borders in Sierra Leone during last year’s Ebola outbreak, which killed thousands of people. When she returned via Newark Liberty International Airport she was stopped, questioned and sent to stay in a tent outside a Newark hospital despite having no symptoms of the disease, which is spread through direct contact with the bodily fluids of an infected person who’s showing symptoms.

“I felt like I was being manipulated. I was literally in the dark,” Hickox, who lives in Oregon, said at a

New York news conference via Skype. “It was so hard. I felt completely alone and completely vulnerable, and I was scared.”

She said Christie’s decision to quarantine her was made out of fear and was politically motivated, although she didn’t elaborate. Christie, a Republican, was considering a run for president and has since entered the race.

Christie’s office isn’t commenting on the pending legal matter, a spokesman said.

Christie said last year he was doing his duty to keep people safe. When asked then about a possible lawsuit, he said he’s been sued lots of times: “Get in line,” he said. “I’m happy to take it on.”

BRIEFLY

Russia shows military might in Syria, also pushes diplomacy

HEMEIMEEM AIR BASE, Syria (AP) — As Russia unleashed waves of warplanes Thursday from this air base in western Syria to pound militant targets, President Vladimir Putin pushed diplomatic efforts with the West, stressing the need “to consider each other as allies in a common fight.”

Russia put its military muscle on display, bringing Moscow-based reporters to view a day’s worth of fighter jets roaring off a runway in dozens of sorties as helicopter gunships patrolled the edges of the sprawling facility.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry will meet Friday

in Vienna, joined by their counterparts from Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both staunch critics of President Bashar Assad.

American killed in raid to free Iraqis held by IS

WASHINGTON (AP) — Believing that Islamic State captives held on a compound in northern Iraq faced “imminent mass execution,” dozens of U.S. special operations troops and Iraqi forces raided the site Thursday, freeing approximately 70 Iraqi prisoners in an operation that saw the first American killed in combat in the country since the U.S. campaign against IS began in 2014, officials said.

The raiders killed and captured a number of militants and recovered what

the Pentagon called a trove of intelligence about the terrorist organization.

The U.S. service member who died was not publicly identified pending notification of relatives. Officials said this was the first American combat death in Iraq since the U.S. began its counter-IS military campaign in August 2014.

Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook said target of the raid was a prison near the town of Hawija and that the raid was undertaken at the request of the Kurdish Regional Government, the semi-autonomous body that governs the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. He said U.S. special operations forces supported what he called an Iraqi peshmerga rescue operation. The peshmerga are the Kurdish region’s organized militia. The U.S. has worked closely with them in training.

EAST OREGONIAN Hermiston **Herald**

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