

Good news for the Big Blackfoot

by staff

Mining cleanup advances in Blackfoot River headwaters

Progress at cleaning up the many complicated sources of mining pollution plaguing the Blackfoot River's headwaters is proceeding apace. Montana's Department of Environmental Quality is tackling wastes and acid- and metals discharges from mine openings on non-federal lands, while the U.S Forest Service is focusing on the same problems on its nearby tracts.

Montana TU and its Big Blackfoot Chapter have been pushing for a comprehensive cleanup since the late 1980s. After fits and starts, including failed experiments resulting from the State allowing the liable parties, Asarco and Arco, to do "voluntary cleanups," additional legal action and

Asarco's bankruptcy produced some \$40 million to get the job done. Post cleanup habitat restoration, including channel and floodplain reconstruction of the upper river,

will be aided by the trust fund established from the State of Montana's successful natural resource damage claim against BP/Arco for historical damages in the Clark Fork watershed.

Tens of thousands of yards of contaminated material have been removed in the last year and trucked to an engineered and lined repository away from vulnerable ground and surface water sources. The infamous tailings dam on Beartrap Creek, long

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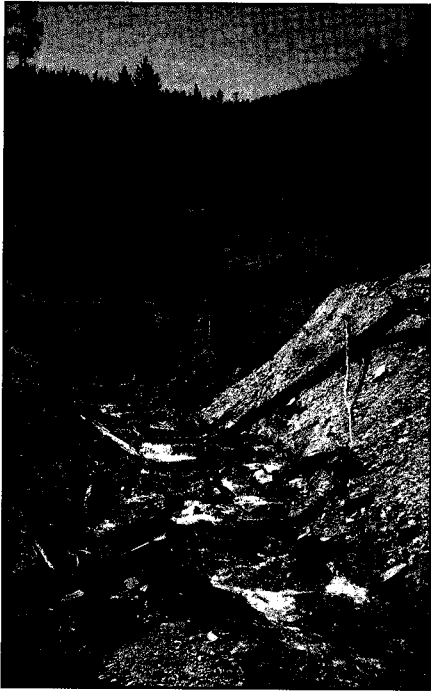
Mike Horse Mine tailings repository site

a catastrophe waiting to happen, has been removed, and the upper reaches of that creek are being restored. Perhaps the two most difficult challenges remaining are how to deal with

a number of old mine portals that are

discharging acidic and metals pollution, as well as what to do with tailings that settled into wetlands after the original tailings dam washed out in 1975. Some of the discharges will need to be collected and treated in an on-site treatment plant for years to come. Some scattered portals will simply be plugged in hopes their small discharges will have negligible impacts over time. The Department

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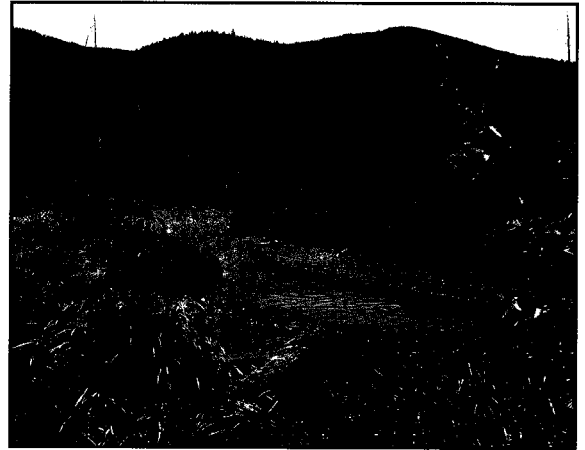


Mike Horse Creek, upper Blackfoot drainage

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of Environmental Quality proposes removing the worst materials from the wetlands, which Montana TU supports. Fortunately, it appears they are limited to the most upstream wetland reaches that aren't readily apparent from Highway 200.

Montana TU staff will continue making occasional on-site visits and monitoring the progress with the agencies. We don't anticipate everything will go perfectly. The agencies have their differences and internal challenges, and it's a complicated project, hampered by scale, tough terrain and weather. But for now DEQ, the Forest Service and the Montana Natural Resource Damage Claim Program deserve your support for pulling off a highly credible cleanup



Wetlands in the upper Blackfoot

that will provide for a healthier fishery in the upper reaches of an iconic river.

For more information contact Bruce Farling at bruce@montanatu.org, or check out the Upper Blackfoot Mining Complex virtual tour at www.deq.mt.gov.