

News Release



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Settlement Brings Millions of Dollars for Coeur d'Alene Basin Clean-up and Restoration

Agreement part of the largest bankruptcy settlement for environmental damage in U.S. history

Millions of dollars will go toward correcting more than a century of mining pollution in Idaho's Coeur d'Alene Basin under the terms of an environmental damage settlement announced today by Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar.

The settlement, the largest bankruptcy settlement for natural resource restoration in U.S. history, awards approximately \$79.4 million to partially restore natural resources in Idaho's Coeur d'Alene Basin damaged by the mining operations that gave the basin the name "Silver Valley." In addition, \$28.9 million will be held by the Successor Coeur d'Alene Custodial and Work Trust to be used to perform work selected by the Environmental Protection Agency as part of its comprehensive remedy at the Coeur d'Alene Site and prioritized by Interior and USDA/FS as co-Natural Resource Trustees.

Nationally, the settlement with ASARCO LLC, a North American mining conglomerate, provides about \$194 million for the recovery of wildlife, habitat and other natural resources managed by Interior and state and tribal governments at more than a dozen sites around the nation. Of the dozen sites, the Coeur d'Alene Basin is scheduled to receive the largest amount of money for natural resource restoration.

"This is a milestone not only for the Federal Government but also for Interior and its Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program," Salazar said. "It exemplifies government working effectively for the American taxpayer to recover damages from polluters and restore and protect significant national landscapes and wildlife resources that have been injured."

The settlement stems from the largest environmental bankruptcy in U.S. history, in which Grupo Mexico agreed to pay \$1.79 billion for environmental liabilities as part of an overall plan to purchase ASARCO LLC out of bankruptcy. Of that amount, about \$494 million will be used by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for cleanup at the Bunker Hill Metallurgical and Superfund site in the Coeur d'Alene Basin, which spans parts of northern Idaho and eastern Washington. Asarco is a copper mining company based in Arizona that is responsible for sites around the country contaminated with hazardous waste.

In over a century of mining in the Coeur d'Alene Basin, millions of tons of ore containing silver, lead and zinc were mined, leading to decades of disposal of wastes onto the lands and into the waters of the basin. Those wastes polluted rivers and streams, soils and riparian areas and seriously harmed fish and other wildlife.

Now that a settlement has been approved, a plan will be developed to address the documented natural resource damages and guide restoration efforts in the Coeur d'Alene Basin by the federal government's natural resource representatives in the basin: the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (lead federal trustee), the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service, along with the Coeur d'Alene Tribe and in consultation with the State of Idaho. During the restoration planning process, the public will be asked to participate and comment. Once a plan is in place, the settlement funds will be used to restore, replace, rehabilitate or acquire the equivalent of the damaged natural resources. The settlement provides only a portion of the money needed to restore natural resources damaged by mining and the release of hazardous substances in the basin.

The natural resource restoration planning and implementation will be coordinated with the EPA's clean-up plans and actions. Natural resource restoration actions are in addition to EPA and/or state government clean-up actions at a hazardous waste site and may exceed the level of clean-up actions. The clean-up and restoration activities will involve millions of dollars and will likely span decades.

As late as the 1880s, the Basin was rich with fish and wildlife. The basin also had abundant evergreen forests, cottonwoods and silver beeches and was home to deer, beaver, muskrat, otter, wolves, mountain lion, badgers, wolverines, moose, bear, numerous bird species and schools of trout. During the next 120 years those conditions changed.

Discovery of gold in the Coeur d'Alene River's North Fork in 1883 attracted thousands of prospectors and their families. While the gold rush was short-lived, the upper basin became the largest historic silver, lead and zinc mining district in the world, ultimately producing 7 million metric tons of lead, 30,000 metric tons of silver and 3 million metric tons of zinc. Impacts soon followed: mining wastes, including arsenic, cadmium, lead and zinc, were discharged directly into the river and its tributaries or were deposited on land, migrating into ground and surface water. The Coeur d'Alene River carried these contaminants west into Coeur d'Alene Lake and adjacent wetlands, and occasional river flooding deposited contaminated sediment throughout the 19,200-acre lower basin floodplain. More than 100 million tons of soil and sediment were impacted by mining, milling, and smelter operations. Remaining waste rock, tailings, mine drainage, and contaminated floodplain sediments continue to pollute the ecosystem with extremely elevated metals contamination.

In 1991, the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Department of Agriculture and the Coeur d'Alene Tribe of Idaho initiated a Natural Resource Damage Assessment under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) and the Clean Water Act to assess damages to natural resources in the Coeur d'Alene Basin resulting from exposure to mining-related metals. The results of this assessment confirmed widespread distribution of mining-related contamination throughout the basin and described the resulting damage to natural resources and the loss of ecosystem services.

The Coeur d'Alene Tribe filed suit in 1991 against Asarco and several other companies, seeking damages for impacts to natural resources in the basin. The federal government filed its suit in 1996. Settlements with some parties have occurred and others are still being negotiated.

The DOI, USDA and the Coeur d'Alene Tribe previously concluded settlements with several other parties potentially responsible for natural resource damages in the basin. These settlements are currently supporting restoration activities, guided by a 2007 Interim Restoration Plan. Some recently completed projects include stream stabilization and culvert passage improvements in Pine Creek and wetlands restoration along the Lower Coeur d'Alene River. More information about these and other projects is available through the report: Coeur d'Alene Basin Natural Resource Damage Restoration Accomplishments: Restoration Activities 2007-08," which is available at <http://www.fws.gov/Pacific/ecoservices/envicon/nrda/pdf/CDAnrdaReport111009.pdf>.

The Coeur d'Alene Tribe also settled previously with ASARCO for about \$5 million dollars, which is being used to develop and implement the 2009 Coeur d'Alene Lake Management Plan. This plan was collaboratively developed by the Coeur d'Alene Tribe and the State of Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

“Working together we have been able to get some good cleanup and restoration work done in the basin and this settlement will help us continue that important work,” said Robyn Thorson, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Pacific Region. “After nearly two decades of litigation, we finally have assurance that some of the damaged resources will eventually be restored.”

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We Share both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov

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