

News Release

For IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Spring Runoff Update:

Latest Animas River water quality results from February through early June are now available from the Mountain Studies Institute

Mountain Studies Institute (MSI), a nonpartisan independent research center, has been monitoring water quality of the Animas River before, during, and after the Gold King Mine release. MSI has continued to monitor the Animas River at Rotary Park during spring runoff and has water quality results from samples collected in February, March, April, May, and June.

“We know there is concern that sediment deposited during the Gold King Mine release could be re-suspended during spring runoff and negatively affect Animas River water quality” said Scott Roberts, MSI’s aquatic ecologist. In early April, for the first time in eight months, the reach of the Animas River from Tall Timbers Resort (located in the Animas River canyon) to Durango rose to the same level it was when the Gold King Mine release occurred, due mostly to snowmelt. “We collected water quality samples to coincide with this flushing event in an effort to capture conditions when sediment deposited along the margins of the Animas River banks could have been re-suspended.”

The monitoring program is part of a partnership between MSI and the City of Durango to communicate Animas River water quality information to the public.

“Our monitoring program aims to understand whether water quality this spring is any different than previous years and if metal concentrations in the river pose any threat to human health, agriculture, or aquatic life” said Marcie Bidwell, MSI’s director.

Results from the spring samples are encouraging.

Levels of metals of concern for human health (arsenic and mercury) and those most harmful to aquatic life (copper, zinc, and selenium) were found to be at levels considered safe according to the Colorado Department of Health and the Environment (CDPHE) water quality standards. All metals analyzed from spring samples were also at safe levels for agricultural use (based on CDPHE water quality standards). Additionally, all metals were below Environmental Protection Agency’s recreational screening levels, which is protective of users who accidentally swallow river water (swimmers, rafters, tubers) or users who intentionally ingest river water (backpackers, overnight river users).

However, MSI has detected high levels of certain metals during spring runoff.

On at least two occasions during 2016 spring runoff, concentrations of manganese and lead surpassed CDPHE water quality standards protecting the Animas River for use as a domestic drinking water source.

However, the City of Durango does not source drinking water from the Animas River during spring runoff. In addition, City of Durango water is thoroughly treated and meets all drinking water quality standards prior to public consumption.

From February through June, there have been several instances when concentrations of aluminum and iron surpassed chronic water quality standards set by CDPHE to protect aquatic life from persistent, long-term exposure to metals. These contaminants are not unprecedented during spring runoff in the Animas River. Similarly high levels of aluminum, iron, and manganese have occurred in the Animas River during spring runoff in previous years prior to the Gold King Mine release. Results from aquatic life monitoring conducted in the fall of 2015 by MSI and Colorado Parks and Wildlife indicate that aquatic life in the Animas River largely survived the Gold King Mine release. MSI will continue to monitor Animas River benthic macroinvertebrate communities in 2016.

In a partnership with the City of Durango, MSI plans to continue to monitor the water quality of the Animas River throughout 2016. “We want to provide information and interpret results for our communities. We have posted water quality monitoring results on our website, www.mountainstudies.org/AnimasRiver, and on the City of Durango’s website, www.durangogov.org.”

Please keep in mind that these observations are from only one monitoring location (Rotary Park in Durango) on the Animas River and may not be indicative of the entire Animas River watershed.

Visit www.mountainstudies.org/AnimasRiver to learn more about MSI’s monitoring efforts and results, as well as upcoming events. Future data updates will be released through MSI’s website and press releases.

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