

SAN VICENTE CREEK MILL SITE *GRIP spurs successful cleanup*

by Andrew Lindlof, AmeriCorps OSM/VISTA Staffer

The San Vicente Creek Mill Site is located alongside San Vicente Creek, about one-half mile down the trail from the Hudson Street highway bridge in Silver City. The site was first used in the 1880s for milling and processing lead and silver ores. It expanded in 1898 into production of copper ores through smelting, with operations continuing until 1913. Operations resumed for short periods in the 1920s to further process new and on-site



SAN VICENTE MILL SITE BEFORE REMEDIATION, INCLUDING REMOVAL OF SOIL AND WASTE PILES CONTAMINATED WITH HEAVY METALS. (GRIP PHOTO)

tailings for gold and silver, and again during World War II for concentrating fluorspar as a strategic mineral.

When processing activities ceased, remnant slag and tailings piles were left to age under the influence of the atmosphere and precipitation. As a result, with each seasonal monsoon rain and snow-melt, heavy-metal-laden tailings could be transported via runoff into the adjacent creek, a public use area.

Due to successful advocacy from GRIP, the Grant County Trails Group, and others, approximately \$4-million in groundwater restoration funds from the New Mexico Office of Natural Resource Trustee (ONRT) were originally allocated for cleanup. These funds came from a \$13-million settlement between Freeport-McMoRan and ONRT regarding thousands of acre-feet in groundwater damages, the result of contamination with acid and heavy metals during years of operations at the Chino, Cobre, and Tyrone mines. Remediation efforts began at the San Vicente site in March 2013.

The Superfund Oversight Section of the New Mexico Environment Department's Ground Water Quality Bureau (NMED-GWQB) took charge of the project and contracted with INTERA Inc. to facilitate cleanup. On-site inspection by INTERA began in April 2013, focusing on lead and arsenic as primary concerns. After site characterization was done and soil contamination assessed, large excavators and haul trucks went to work.

Contaminated waste removed from the site was transported to Freeport-McMoRan's Tyrone Mine and incorporated into an existing waste pile. In order to reduce the cost of cleanup along the creek, GRIP encouraged Freeport-McMoRan and regulatory agencies to permit the tailings to be disposed of at the mine. This successful effort ultimately saved approximately \$2-million, making funds available for the Bayard Waste Water Treatment Plant Reuse Project that otherwise wouldn't have been funded. After contaminated soil removal, clean fill material was brought in, the

surface was graded, and multiple erosion-control features installed. Remediated areas were seeded and re-vegetation is monitored by the NMED-GWQB.

This project culminated in the removal of approximately 22,500 cubic yards of heavy-metal-contaminated soil, site remediation, and confirmation that the riparian zone, upstream and downstream from the site along San Vicente Creek meets the NMED residential standards for heavy-metal contaminants. The final project report will become available to the public in early 2014. If you have questions or would like more information, please contact me at andrew@gilaresources.info or 575.538.8078.



SAN VICENTE MILL SITE AFTER REMEDIATION. (GRIP PHOTO)

CONTINUED FROM AWSA UPDATE ON P. 1

can't be given *carte blanche* to do whatever they want and that checks and balances are needed to ensure the integrity of the AWSA planning process," said Siwik. "At the same time, however, we are very concerned that the ISC approved changes to three diversion projects without any public input. Engineering information was available to allow staff to make these recommended changes, but yet the information has not been shared with stakeholders. This lack of transparency is unacceptable and contributes to the ongoing perception that the ISC disregards its own process as it pursues a Gila River diversion project. The ISC needs to immediately make this information publicly available."

The ISC and Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) are assessing the costs, technical feasibility and cost-benefit of the 15 AWSA proposals submitted by a range of stakeholders in southwestern New Mexico. Preliminary results of these analyses will be presented during the upcoming state legislative session that begins in January. The BOR has completed analyses of engineering costs of diversion alternatives, yet these results have not been provided to stakeholders. The Gila Conservation Coalition is advocating for release of this information in advance of the legislative session so that stakeholders can review and comment on the assessments.

The Arizona Water Settlements Act of 2004 gave our state the option of diverting water from the Gila River, New Mexico's last free-flowing river, if the state agreed to pay for water from Arizona to replace what is diverted. The AWSA provided \$66-million for community water projects to meet local water needs and up to \$62-million more if New Mexico elects to divert the river. Stakeholders have been engaged in a planning process to determine the best way to cost-effectively meet southwestern New Mexico's future water needs under the AWSA. The next AWSA quarterly public meeting is at 6 pm, Jan. 13, 2014, in the 3rd floor Seminar Room of the WNMU Student Memorial Building in Silver City.