

PRESS RELEASE

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Environmental Groups Demand Answers from State Agencies on Hwy 15 Spill

Leaders of four Grant County-based environmental advocacy organizations wrote the State Police and Department of Transportation on Monday, demanding investigations into and accountability for the asphalt emulsion spill that resulted from a tanker overturning on State Route 15 roughly 20 miles north of Silver City on September 26. Additionally, the organizations wrote the New Mexico Environment Department and U.S. Forest Service - Gila National Forest, urging them to take appropriate enforcement action and to carefully coordinate the cleanup of the spill and long-term restoration of the area.

“There appears to have been an appalling series of failures by the State Police and Transportation Department in properly reporting and responding to this incident, including a nearly complete absence of information for the public until the Environment Department got involved,” said Allyson Siwik, Executive Director of the Gila Resources Information Project.

Todd Schulke, co-founder of the Center for Biological Diversity, also signed the letters. “I was the first person on the scene besides the driver, and I immediately notified Central Dispatch of the accident and the fact that tar-like material was leaking,” Schulke said. “The state police showed up on the scene within minutes and couldn't have missed the spill. Why didn't they report this immediately?” added Schulke. “The silence we witnessed for over a week demonstrates a stunning disregard for wildlife and possibly human health.”

In addition to demanding public transparency around reporting and responding failures, the groups make recommendations about the ongoing cleanup and long-term restoration efforts being conducted by the trucking contractor, R. Marley, LLC, and being supervised by the Environment Department.

“Corrective action plans must be developed, approved and implemented in consultation with appropriate U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish biologists in order to protect downstream Gila trout habitat,” said Siwik.

“The area of the spill is one of the most botanically diverse in the Forest and one of the most popular recreation areas,” said Patrice Mutchnick, Director of Heart of the Gila. “We want to ensure that the ecological integrity is restored, and that the habitat along these roadways is protected into the future. We are grateful to the volunteers who raised the alarm and have been out there cleaning up the residue-covered soils. It demonstrates how much the Gila means to so many people in this community.”

“We are requesting monitoring, oversight, and reliable public information from the state Environment Department,” said Donna Stevens, Executive Director of the Upper Gila Watershed Alliance. “We do not believe they are responsible for the long delay in starting cleanup, but we need them to commit adequate personnel and resources to ensure the private contractor does a good job to ensure the area is remediated and restored adequately, and if not, call on the state to intervene.”

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