

Is water safe to drink from the Smith River?

April 7, 2023



At the Tuesday, March 28, Board of Supervisors meeting, 5th District Supervisor Dean Wilson pulled several items off the consent agenda for additional discussion. One of the items pulled called for a letter of support to the Six Rivers National Forest supervisor expressing concerns about legacy mines within the Smith River National Recreation Area, as requested by the Natural Resources Goal committee and the Smith River Collaborative. The proposed letter identified arsenic and copper leeching from an estimated 90 vacated mines, ending up in the Smith River.

The term remediation was generously used in the discussion. 2nd District Supervisor Valerie Starkey spoke of lack of full understanding and intent of the word remediation. Smith River Alliance co-chair Grant Werschull approached the public speaker's platform and explained remediation is the corrective effort to remove debris and potential hazardous material from the legacy mines sites that may compromise our drinking water from the Smith.

The conversation about this item quickly changed from addressing land rights for mine owners to minerals leeching dangerous chemicals into the Smith. Werschull, speaking on behalf of the Forest Service and the Smith River Collaborative, broached the subject of safe drinking water.

Werschull alleged arsenic, copper and other minerals are leeching into the headwaters of Rowdy Creek. With the support of the letter, Werkschull hopes to secure very competitive funding to abate long-abandoned leeching materials from the long-dormant mines. Werschull stated, "I believe our community's drinking water is safe. But these legacy mines pose a serious threat to this outstanding drinking water."

He underscored the threat to drinking water can be addressed through remediation and preventive efforts.

4th District supervisor Joey Borges questioned and expressed concern the process of disturbing the existing landscape in and around the legacy mines, thereby hastening the leeching process.

Smith River resident Branden Bieber was shocked to learn the water in the Smith is in process of being contaminated. Directing his criticism toward 3rd District Supervisor Chris Howard whose district includes Smith River, he said, "...you've put my family at risk by not sharing this vital information with your colleagues on the board."

Public speaker Linda Sutter attributed the lack of communication and absence of individual supervisors' failure to report out activities between board meetings as contributing to this lack of communication. Sutter pointed out supervisors are prevented from speaking with more than one other supervisor, per the Brown Act.

Supervisor Wilson responded he's confident the water is safe to drink across all Del Norte County including Smith River and he's not intimidated by these scare tactics. Wilson expressed his concern for a measured response and a respect for property owners' rights.

Howard responded by apologizing to his colleagues and making a motion to table the consent agenda item for discussion at a later date. The motion to table passed unanimously.

The board meets again Tuesday, April 11, at 10 a.m.