

Mining company leaves taxpayers with a \$100 million cleanup bill—and it's just one of many

[Mark Sumner](#) , Daily Kos Staff , Monday March 18, 2019 · Share this article

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Water treatment plant for contaminated water flowing abandoned mine pit in Butte, Montana



There are many ways in which Donald Trump has [rewarded companies while eroding environmental policies](#), but the mining industry in particular has benefited spectacularly. Not only have there been specific gifts to the coal industry in terms of relaxing rules around coal ash retention ponds and completely scrapping the Clean Power Plan, but mining in general has been handed giant cash grabs in the form of additional public lands opened to mining and relaxed rules around dumping mining waste in streams. And those are just the big, easily visible changes. CNN also found that there has been a [60 percent drop in inspections](#) and an even larger decrease in the number of cases forwarded to the Justice Department for prosecution.

For polluters, Donald Trump represents a free lunch. For taxpayers, not so much.

[As Mother Jones reports](#), the potential environmental damage caused by mining is immense. And since rules around cleanup have often allowed companies to “self bond”—making a promise to conduct a proper clean up without actually acquiring insurance to cover that future cost—failing companies can leave taxpayers holding both the bill and an environmental disaster. For example, a single abandoned gold mine in the mountains south of the Fort Belknap Indian Community in Montana has left the area with a legacy of discolored water so polluted with acid that contact with it “makes skin burn and turn red.” After 20 years of attempted cleanup, the bill for dealing with this single mine is approaching \$100 million, and the cleanup is *still* in early stages. The final bill is inestimable, and no approach is likely to restore the pristine water the area enjoyed previous to mining.

Before mining begins, companies are expected to set aside money to cover reclamation, based on cost estimates made by the Interior Department. Experience has demonstrated that the number provided is often far too low to begin with, but companies have routinely appealed before agreeing to even lower numbers in arbitration or in court. And even then, the ability of larger companies to “self bond” can mean that the supposed money set aside can amount to nothing at all when the bill comes due.

The total of reclamation costs already carried by taxpayers is in the billions, and the issue is only getting worse as deregulatory efforts like those instituted by Trump make it easy to centralize the gains, and externalize the costs.

Whether its health and climate effects from burning coal, or the acid and toxins spread in recovering metals, the mining industry is utterly dependent on the ability to collect its gains and dodge the real costs. “Hard rock” mining for metals can leave streams not just filled with skin-burning acid, but saturated with lead, mercury, and other metals. While those things are picked up as the acidic water flows through the leftover rubble of the mining, another extremely toxic metal—arsenic—is directly used in recovering gold from ore. An ounce of gold may already seem costly, but the real cost can be measured in vanished fish, dead wildlife, and mountain landscapes turned into toxic horrors.

The sheer scale of some mining operations has so far covered up the size of the difference between what’s been put aside and what’s actually needed. Copper mines in Utah and Arizona have been in near continuous operation since the 1870s. The waste in both areas is measured in the hundreds of billions of tons. How close is either of these states to having even a small fraction of what it would take to attempt to clean up these sites? It’s hard to tell. Most states are allowed “primacy,” the ability to manage their own reclamation programs, and the accounts on what’s been set aside and how it’s been secured are far from consistent.

But while those huge old mines hang out there, the huge *new* mines are no better, not when rules allow them to pick up federal lands at bargain prices, and mine them with not just reduced concern about environmental issues, but almost no chance of having to pay for it in court even if they’re caught. More permits, fewer inspections, even fewer prosecutions, and companies allowed to walk away from the reclamation cost after owners have pocketed the profits: It’s no wonder these companies love Donald Trump.