

# **Central City/Clear Creek Clear Creek and Gilpin Counties, Colorado**

## **Site Summary**

### **Location**

The Central City / Clear Creek Superfund site is located in Clear Creek and Gilpin counties, approximately 30 miles west of Denver. The Superfund study area covers the 400-square mile drainage basin of Clear Creek, which has been affected by a number of inactive precious metal mines. The Superfund investigation has focused on mine drainage tunnels and mine tailings and waste rock piles.

### **History**

Gold was discovered near Idaho Springs in 1859, and in the Black Hawk/Central City area in 1860. For the next 20 years, the Black Hawk/Central City area was the leading mining center in Colorado with the construction of mills to process the gold and silver found through placer and hard rock mining. The decline of mining in the area began with the silver crash in the 1890's and the rise in mining in Leadville. However, mining continued to be an important industry in Clear Creek and Gilpin counties from the turn of the century until approximately 1950. Since 1950, mining in the area has been limited with only a handful of mines currently operating.

The site was placed on the list of Superfund sites in September 1983. Since that time, the Department, EPA and the local community have worked to clean up heavy metal contamination resulting from decades of hard rock mining in the area. The Department and EPA have developed clean-up plans to deal with the worst sources of contamination within the Clear Creek watershed.

In 1992, limited stakes gaming began in Central City and Black Hawk. Introduction of gambling has led to some land use changes. While these changes have the potential to increase the direct human exposure to mine wastes, many mine waste clean-up projects were implemented as property developed.

## **Environmental Concerns**

The most significant environmental impacts associated with the site are the impacts on the Clear Creek stream system that include a reduced fishery and significant impacts to other aquatic life and habitat. Acidic mine water that drains from many mines contains various heavy metals, and mine wastes such as tailings and waste rock contribute to the non-point source impacts to the basin. Clear Creek is a drinking water source for more than one-quarter million people living in the Denver area, and is a favored place for kayaking, rafting, fishing, wildlife watching and gold panning. The human health hazard from this site involves potential exposure to heavy metals, primarily lead, arsenic, and cadmium. Soil from the tailings piles and waste rock contains heavy metals.