

http://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/butte-mine-officials-snow-geese-deaths-number-into-the-thousands/article_3263f22d-8047-5aa0-8567-8d2118161c1e.html



BILLINGS GAZETTE

Billings Gazette

Dec 7, 2016

Butte mine officials: Snow geese deaths number into the thousands

Susan Dunlap susan.dunlap@mtstandard.com



Walter Hinick, The Montana Standard

Pictured last week, this snow goose was treated at the animal shelter after drinking toxic pit water. The bird died Friday night.

Several thousand migrating snow geese perished in the toxic Berkeley Pit water where they landed last week, mine officials said Tuesday.

Montana Resources and Atlantic Richfield Company officials say they are not yet ready to release a hard number because federal and state agencies have to verify numbers collected. But MR manager of environmental affairs Mark Thompson said the mining company expects the final number to be several times greater than the 1995 snow goose die-off incident.

The mine estimates that as many as 10,000 snow geese landed on the pit's contaminated water the night of Nov. 28. Thompson said previously that the pit's 700-acre lake was "white with birds."

Since then, MR and ARCO — the responsible parties for the Berkeley Pit Superfund site — worked around the clock to get the birds to leave and to keep any additional birds from landing, say federal officials.

A spokesman from the Environmental Protection Agency also says the companies and EPA are keeping an eye on additional flocks headed toward Butte.

The preliminary number released Tuesday is based on photos taken from drone and aircraft flights over the pit. The counting is not yet complete, said Thompson.

Butte-Silver Bow community enrichment director Ed Randall said an animal control officer picked up another live snow goose on Amherst Avenue Tuesday morning. That bird was taken to a veterinarian for care.

Including the live bird, as many as six have been found around town since last week. Two more dead geese were reported Tuesday south of Butte, said Thompson. Two dead geese were found by individuals in the Walmart parking lot last Thursday. A third was found alive on Amherst Avenue last Wednesday, but it later died.

Thompson said MR has directed Butte-Silver Bow animal control to "do everything possible" to try to save any birds found alive. Randall said the veterinarian treatment involves flushing the birds both inside and out to "get everything out of them." The pit water contains sulfuric acid and heavy metals.

MR will foot the vet bills, said an EPA spokesperson.

Randall said if any birds found in town survive, BSB will release them back into the wild.

A spokesperson for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said the agency will pick up the 23 dead snow geese MR has already collected Wednesday. Those birds will be sent to a lab for necropsies.

MR and ARCO could receive fines if EPA determines the companies were not in compliance with the bird hazing program. That program was designed by state and federal agencies in response to the 1995 snow geese die-off when 342 birds died.

Thompson said he is confident EPA will find that the companies were in compliance.

“If it wasn’t for the diligence and dedication of MR and ARCO people out there 24-7, trying everything and really giving it their heart and soul, this would be much, much worse. These guys really cared,” said Thompson.

MR reported that as many as 50 snow geese were alive Monday on the Berkeley Pit. Thompson said Tuesday that all the birds are now dead.

http://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/montana/butte-mine-officials-counting-dead-geese-in-berkeley-pit-no/article_7ba894ba-a5ce-5e82-a1e5-bf4c66c3f483.html



BILLINGS GAZETTE

Billings Gazette

Dec 5, 2016



Photo courtesy of Montana Resources

Butte mine officials counting dead geese in Berkeley Pit, no solid number yet

Susan Dunlap susan.dunlap@mtstandard.com

In this photo, taken Friday morning, snow geese leave the Berkeley Pit after five days of swimming on the toxic water. So far, approximately 50 remain alive, according to Montana Resources. The mining company is still counting the dead and won't release preliminary numbers, but mine officials say they expect it to be larger than the 342 snow geese die-off in 1995.

BUTTE — Montana Resources officials say they won't have a final tally of snow geese that perished last week in the contaminated Berkeley Pit water until mid-week at the earliest.

Federal officials say once the count is complete, the Environmental Protection Agency will determine if MR was adhering to the bird hazing program appropriately. Fines could be levied if the geese landed due to company negligence, say EPA officials.

The program, based on loud noises to scare birds, was put in place due to the 1995 snow geese die-off when 342 died on the pit. State and federal agencies designed the program.

"Trying to get some idea of mortality has been difficult," said EPA Montana Superfund director Joe Vranka.

The problem is due to the lack of access to the lake. The southeast walls have been unreliable for the last few years. As a result, officials cannot take a boat out on the water. Officials must rely on overhead imagery to get the numbers, said Vranka.

Using both telescope, drone and aircraft, mine officials began counting the dead birds over the weekend. MR officials said Monday they are still counting.

Mark Thompson, the mine's manager of environmental affairs, would only say to expect the count "to be bigger" than the 1995 incident.

At that time, the 342 snow geese died due to drinking pit water, which is high in sulfuric acid. Necropsies also showed that those birds had high levels of heavy metals in their kidneys. That die-off gained national media attention.

The mining company estimates that as many as 10,000 migrating snow geese landed in the pit water the night of November 28. The usual landing spot for migrating snow geese — Freezeout Lake west of Great Falls – was largely frozen when the geese passed over, according to previous reports from the state Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Warm Springs Ponds, south of Deer Lodge, another popular layover spot for migrating birds, were also mostly frozen, according to a previous story.

Three snow geese were found elsewhere in Butte last week, said Butte-Silver Bow community enrichment director Ed Randall.

An individual reported to animal control on Thursday that there were two dead geese in the Walmart parking lot, Randall said. Another person found a live goose in front of a casino on the 2200 block of Amherst Avenue Wednesday. That goose died Thursday while still in animal control custody, Randall said. All three dead birds were turned over to MR.

MR officials said they collected 20 dead snow geese for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to analyze. They say they are also holding the three dead found in town in case federal officials want to perform necropsies on those birds.

Thompson said about 50 live snow geese remain in the pit, swimming on the pit's toxic lake a week after landing.

According to a 2002 report on Montana Resources and Atlantic Richfield Company's bird hazing program, the pit is too large for either netting or Styrofoam bird balls to be practical. Currently the contaminated lake is around 700 acres in size.

ARCO and MR are the responsible parties for the Berkeley Pit Superfund site.

The "passive hazing" program, which noise-based, has been largely successful, according to the report. Between 1996 and 2001, over 22,000 birds were observed at the Berkeley Pit; 75 bird mortalities were reported during those years.

Mine officials say they are checking with federal officials to see if they should expect any additional large bird migrations headed this way.

Vranka said EPA is in contact with officials at Freezeout Lake to watch for more birds. MR is "continuing round-the-clock hazing efforts to keep birds out of the pit," said Vranka.
