



U.S. Office of Surface Mining

News Release



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West Virginia Awarded \$20.8 Million to Reclaim Dangerous Abandoned Mine Lands

Bush Administration proposal would accelerate reclamation of hazardous abandoned mines

(WASHINGTON) – Interior Secretary Gale Norton today announced that the Interior Department's Office of Surface Mining has awarded West Virginia \$20.8 million to help reclaim dangerous abandoned mine lands.

West Virginia's grant will be used to reclaim dangerous high-priority AML sites. High priority AML problems are those that threaten public health and safety and could cause substantial physical harm to persons or property, and to which people are currently exposed. They include clogged streams and stream lands, dangerous highwalls, impoundments, piles, embankments and slides, hazardous or explosive gases, hazardous water bodies, underground mine fires, surface burning, portals and vertical openings, subsidence and polluted drinking water.

The grant is part of OSM's Abandoned Mine Land program which is due to expire on September 30, 2004. President Bush has proposed legislation to continue the program and accelerate the rate of reclamation for the most dangerous sites.

Today only 52 percent of the funds the Department of the Interior disburses under the Abandoned Mine Land (AML) program actually goes to high-priority coal mine reclamations. The Administration's proposal, which would reauthorize the government's authority to collect an Abandoned Mine Land fee from coal companies, would direct more funds to where problems remain and eliminate all significant health and safety problems within 25 years. The same job would take almost 50 years if the current system were continued.

"All Americans have benefited from Appalachian coal for 200 years, but residents living near coalfields are the ones who have had to live with the consequences and the risks to their health and safety," said Secretary Norton. "The Abandoned Mine Land program has made thousands of Americans living in the coalfields safer, but the job is not finished. Even after 25 years of extraordinary national effort, we still have almost \$3 billion worth of high-priority hazards to health and safety waiting to be cleaned up."

In West Virginia almost \$733 million worth of high-priority problems remain. The Office of Surface Mining estimated last year that more than 693,000 West Virginians are living less than a mile from a dangerous abandoned mine site.

Under the Administration's legislation, West Virginia would receive an additional \$8.4 million dollars annually. That would raise West Virginia's share of cleanup funds from \$20.8 million yearly to a little more than \$29 million, a 40 percent increase. Total funding would amount to close about \$886 million over the next 22 years.

"By targeting more of our money and speeding up the rate at which we can remove hazards, we will be able to remove 142,000 Americans per year from danger nationwide - or 66,000 more people every year," said Norton. "In West Virginia it would enable us to get 17,500 more people out of danger each year than under current law, a total of 27,726 people every year."

Sen. Arlen Specter (PA) has introduced the Administration's proposal as S. 2049 and Rep. John Peterson (PA) has introduced the legislation in the House as H.R. 3778.

"The grant we've just awarded will give West Virginia's reclamation program a lot of what it needs to continue working on this enormous problem," said Norton. "But we aren't yet doing the best we can for West Virginians. With the President's proposed legislation, we can put our money where the worst problems are, better protect the people of West Virginia and eliminate these unnecessary dangers to life and limb 22 years sooner."

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