

# Time to Finish the Job on Abandoned Mines

*By Gale Norton*

Recently I visited an area near Cadiz in Harrison County, Ohio, to look at the work being done to reclaim an abandoned mine site where a dangerous highwall towers beside U.S. Highway 250.

When I saw how close that 50-foot cliff is to a highway, I realized firsthand that we're in a race to rehabilitate places like this before someone is tragically hurt or killed. Whenever I've visited similar sites, I've always been struck by how many dangerous abandoned coal mining sites are near where people live and work.

They are not just eyesores. They are death traps.

Luckily, it looks as if the state will get the Highway 250 site restored before anyone is hurt there. But people already have been injured or killed at similar sites in Mahoning County, Meigs County, Columbia County, Perry County and all over the Ohio Valley coalfields.

For the past 25 years the Federal Government, state governments, communities and watershed groups have been working to clean up the remnants of coal mining that took place before the reforms of the Surface Mining Act were passed by Congress in 1977.

We have done extraordinary work. But even after 25 years of national effort, we still have almost \$3 billion worth of high-priority hazards to health and safety waiting to be cleaned up in this country.

In Ohio, that means, there is still almost \$110 million worth of work to do. In West Virginia almost \$733 million worth of high-priority problems remain.

The U.S. Department of the Interior's Office of Surface Mining estimates that more than 3.5 million Americans are living less than a mile from dangerous health and safety hazards created by abandoned coal mines.

An estimated 169,000 Ohioans and more than 693,000 West Virginians are living less than a mile from a dangerous abandoned mine site. And thousands more live every day with the environmental impacts to streams.

The truth is -- even with all we have accomplished -- we are not yet doing our best to stop this needless loss of life. That's what President Bush wants to change.

Today only 52 percent of the funds the Department of the Interior disburses under the Abandoned Mine Land program actually go to high-priority mine reclamations.

Because of the promises made 25 years ago when Congress enacted the Surface Mining Act, we are not able today to put our money where it is needed most. Unless this system is changed, it will take 60 more years to finish this job.

The President has a proposal to get serious about improving health and safety by getting these dangerous sites repaired in Ohio, West Virginia and across the country. The President's plan will start putting the money where it is needed most. What will that mean for Ohio and West Virginia?

Under the President's proposed legislation, Ohio will receive an additional \$4.1 million dollars annually to spend on removing hazards caused by abandoned coal mines. That would raise Ohio's share of cleanup funds from more than \$5.6 million to \$9.7 million annually – an increase of 73 percent.

West Virginia will receive an additional \$8.4 million dollars annually. That would raise West Virginia's share of cleanup funds from about \$21 million yearly to a little more than \$29 million – a 40 percent increase.

The President's legislation will finish the job we've started and finish it sooner. We will change the current statutory allocation of fee collections and start putting our money where the problem is. This will make it possible for us to finish the job two decades sooner and at a savings of \$3.2 billion.

The President's legislation will get more people in the coalfields out of danger and in less time. 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.

In Ohio, that would mean tripling the number of people we could remove from danger each year, from just 4,889 to more than 13,000. That would be a 166 percent increase. 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 almost 28,000 people every year. That would be a yearly increase of 172 percent.

Coal has been mined in the Ohio Valley for hundreds of years. Coal from this area helped make the Industrial Revolution possible in the United States; it helped build the railroads that made the Westward Movement possible; it fueled our victory in World War II and powered our nation's rise to a global economic and political power.

When the nation called, the Ohio Valley answered. But while all Americans benefited from coal from Ohio and West Virginia, the health and environmental costs fell on Ohioans and West Virginians.

Under the President's proposed legislation, we can put our money where the worst problems are, better protect the people of West Virginia and Ohio and eliminate these unnecessary dangers to life and limb 22 years sooner.

*Gale Norton is Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior.*