

## Kingsport, TN News-Times

### Official outlines plan to speed up mine reclamation

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By [WALTER LITTRELL](#)

ELY CREEK - "Like we see here today, these are real problems that affect real people," said Rebecca Watson, assistant secretary for land and minerals management at the U.S. Department of the Interior, as she discussed plans to reauthorize the Abandoned Mine Land fee.

Watson talked about the fee while touring the Ely and Puckett Creeks ecosystem restoration project near St. Charles on Wednesday, saying the Bush administration has a proposal to take care of other such sites in a more timely fashion.

The Ely Creek site was recently restored, through the use of AML funds, to eliminate acid mine drainage issues that left the creek devoid of aquatic life.

In the past, money collected from the AML fee went directly to cleaning up abandoned coal mine sites. Since some states with fewer abandoned coal mine sites finished their reclamation work relatively soon, the government began to see problems in timely restoration of abandoned mine lands because, under current law, those states are still entitled to receive half of the fees collected on coal produced within their jurisdiction.

Watson said coal production has shifted from the East, where many abandoned sites exist, to the Western states, where there are few abandoned mines. These states are now getting about half of the money collected, even though they have no priority one or two sites, she said.

Watson said the Bush administration plan would redirect AML fees to states where the need is a priority.

"We have a proposal that would take care of the money owed to states currently in production and try to take care of these sites in 25 years, not in 200 years. The good thing is that our proposal pays for itself," said Watson.

According to the Office of Surface Mining Web site, the plan eliminates the state-share allocation and focuses all future collections toward reclamation of the highest priority abandoned coal mine sites. It would provide all states and tribes



With the Ely Creek Bogs in the background, Jeff Linkinhoker, project manager for the Ely and Puckett Creeks ecosystem restoration project, talks with Virginia Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management Rebecca Watson Wednesday. Walter Littrell photo.

with sufficient funds to complete their highest priority sites decades sooner than under current law, while honoring commitments made to states and tribes in the past.

Although some Western legislators are proposing an alternative to the Bush plan, Watson said she is hopeful a compromise can be worked out before September.

The Ely Creek reclamation site was the worst acid mine drainage site in Virginia's seven coalfield counties prior to the restoration project, said Butch Lambert of the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy,

The project purpose was to restore the aquatic ecosystem impacted by acid mine drainage from coal mines abandoned prior to the Surface Mine Control and Reclamation Act of 1977.

The project was constructed by the Nashville District Corps of Engineers in a partnership with Lee County, DMME, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, the Nature Conservancy, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

It was funded with 65 percent federal money and 35 percent non-federal funds. DMME provided the required matching money from the AML 10 percent Acid Mine Drainage Set Aside Program, Appalachian Clean Streams Program and Tennessee Valley Authority funds.

The sites were designed using passive treatment systems, which operate by gravity. A feasibility study began on the project in 1997, and construction was completed just last month. Construction will begin on two more sites within the Ely Creek and Puckett Creek watersheds next year. Similar projects are being planned for several other creeks in the region.

Nationwide, there are about \$3.2 billion in high-priority abandoned mine hazards. The AML fund currently has an unappropriated balance of about \$1.5 billion.