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Cleanup needed

By John Peterson and Don Sherwood

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Exit the Pennsylvania Turnpike and head north, and you will soon find yourself in a land of majestic rolling hills, enchanting forests, sparkling streams and abundant wildlife. Rural Pennsylvania epitomizes the term "great outdoors," with awe-inspiring scenery and almost limitless opportunities for outdoor recreation and adventure.

But take a closer look, and you will also find the scars from Pennsylvania's coal history in the form of dangerous abandoned mines. From the anthracite region of the Schuylkill, Lackawanna and Wyoming Valleys to bituminous coal country throughout central and western Pennsylvania, there are more than 4,600 abandoned mines dotting the state's countryside that are dangerous or environmentally hazardous.

In April, a teenager fell 100 feet into an abandoned mine shaft south of Shamokin, Pa. He miraculously survived. But since then, separate incidents have claimed the lives of a 14-year-old boy and a 30-year-old volunteer fireman. We know of at least 45 deaths and numerous injuries at abandoned mine sites in Pennsylvania alone over the past 30 years, and more than 1.6 million of our citizens live less than a mile from a dangerous abandoned mine.

Abandoned mines also cause serious environmental and health hazards, polluting streams and watersheds throughout Appalachia. In Pennsylvania, more than 3,000 miles of our streams run red with acid mine drainage.

While Pennsylvania is home to the majority of the nation's abandoned mines, other historic coal states like West Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio also share much of the damage from our nation's coal history. Together, these states provided the coal that fueled the industrial revolution, powered early railroads, helped win two world wars and made America the superpower that it is today.

While we are proud to have played an important role in our nation's history, residents of historic coal states have had to live with the health, safety and environmental consequences of coal mining that took place well before Congress passed mining reforms in 1977 as part of the Surface Mining Act.

Since that time, the federal government has been working with states, communities and conservation organizations to clean up these abandoned coal mines under the Abandoned Mine Lands reclamation program. Under this program, fees are collected on the sale of coal and are used to clean up hazardous mines across the country.

Under the current formula, however, the majority of funding is directed to states based on their current level of coal production instead of their historic production. The result is that states like Wyoming, which only recently began mining coal and do not bear scars from early coal-mining techniques, receive the majority of the mine-reclamation funds, while historic coal states are shortchanged by the program.

Only 52 percent of mine-reclamation funding actually is being used to clean up high-priority abandoned coal mines as a result of the current reclamation formula. While Wyoming is using the program to pay for building construction, roadwork and other unrelated projects, Pennsylvania and other historic coal states are still 60 years and several billion dollars away from finishing the job of cleaning up our hazardous abandoned mines.

The current program is set to expire on Sept. 30 unless Congress votes to reauthorize it. Working with the Bush Administration, we have introduced legislation with Sen. Arlen Specter that would not only reauthorize this much-needed program, but would accelerate mine cleanups across the country by reprioritizing the Abandoned Mine Lands program to clean up the most hazardous, high-priority abandoned mines first.

By using the program for its intended purpose of cleaning up abandoned coal mines, our proposal would clean up all high-priority abandoned mine sites in approximately 25 years instead of 60, while actually saving the program more than \$3 billion. By directing money to where the problems are, more than 140,000 Americans will be removed from danger every year.

It's time to get serious about eliminating the health, safety and environmental hazards caused by abandoned coal mines. Congress has until Sept. 30 to reauthorize the Abandoned Mine Lands program. This reauthorization must include the necessary reforms to turn our abandoned mine lands back into beautiful forests, sparkling streams and hazard-free recreation areas for our families to enjoy.

Reps. John Peterson and Don Sherwood are Republican congressmen from Pennsylvania. Both serve on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior.