



U.S. Office of Surface Mining

News Release



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For immediate release

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Alaska Awarded \$1.5 Million to Reclaim Abandoned Coal Mine Lands

Bush Administration proposal would accelerate reclamation of hazardous abandoned coal mines

(WASHINGTON) – Interior Secretary Gale Norton today announced that the Interior Department's Office of Surface Mining has awarded Alaska's annual \$1.5 million grant to help reclaim abandoned coal mine lands.

The Office of Surface Mining estimated last year that more than 596 Alaska residents are living less than a mile from an abandoned mine site. Alaska has about \$41 million worth of unreclaimed high-priority Abandoned Mine Land problems.

High-priority AML problems threaten public health and safety and could cause substantial physical harm to persons or property. 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 Office of Surface Mining (OSM) collects fees on current coal mining to fund reclamation of coal mine sites abandoned before 1977. However, OSM's authority to collect the fee is scheduled to expire September 30. President Bush has proposed legislation to continue the program and accelerate the rate of reclamation for the most dangerous sites and get more Americans out of danger sooner.

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 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.

"The Abandoned Mine Land program has made thousands of Americans living in the coalfields safer, but the job is not finished," said Norton. "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, including \$41 million worth in Alaska alone. The President's proposed legislation will let us get serious about finishing this job."

“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. “It would enable us to provide an additional \$500,000 to Alaska to get more work done each year and finish this job so nobody in Alaska would be at risk from the dangers of abandoned coal mine sites.”

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. Alaska’s annual grant under the President’s legislation would immediately increase from \$1.5 million to \$2 million.

“The grant we’ve just awarded will give Alaska’s reclamation program some of what it needs to continue working on this enormous problem,” said Norton. “But we aren’t yet doing the best we can do. With the President’s proposed legislation, we can get serious about this cleanup, put our money where the problems are, better protect the people of Alaska and eliminate these unnecessary dangers to life and limb 22 years sooner.”

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