

U.S. Department of the Interior  
Office of Surface Mining  
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## **OSM study finds 3.5 million Americans at risk from nearby abandoned mine hazards**

*On-line inventory with maps, information available*

More than 3.5 million Americans live less than a mile from health and safety hazards created by abandoned coal mines, according to a recent analysis by the US Office of Surface Mining.

Nearly 1.2 million live less than half a mile from dangerous high-priority hazards.

Abandoned Mine Land (AML) problems are classified into five priorities, with the vast majority of restoration efforts addressing sites considered either Priority 1 (extreme danger to public health, safety, and general welfare) or Priority 2 (adverse affects to public health, safety, and general welfare). Hazards that often cause death or injury include highwalls, mine shafts or openings, water impoundments, landslides and mine fires. Many such sites become "attractive nuisances" where people come to swim, ride four-wheelers or explore and risk serious or even fatal injury.

In 1977 Congress passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) requiring that coal operators reclaim mined lands and assessing a fee on current coal production to pay for the cleanup of mine lands abandoned before the law was passed. The Department of the Interior's Office of Surface Mining (OSM) is the federal agency responsible for overseeing State implementation of SMCRA, including cleanup of hazardous sites.

"During the past 25 years we have eliminated abandoned mine dangers on over 180,000 acres of mine sites," said Jeff Jarrett, director of OSM. "But we estimate this is only about 20 percent of the hazards throughout the country. It's important for people to become aware of the dangers and keep out of abandoned mines while we continue the important job of reclaiming the remaining hazardous abandoned mine sites."

Last year, OSM began a series of discussions with its State and Tribal partners on what performance measures should be established for the AML program. As a result, OSM and its partners set a goal of reducing "the number of people at risk for Priority 1 & 2 Abandoned Mine Land hazards." A preliminary analysis was conducted by OSM staff to determine the universe of approximately how many individuals were at risk from Priority 1 & 2 AML sites on State and Tribal lands at the present time.

To estimate the number of Americans potentially at risk from Abandoned Mine Land hazards, OSM staff compared census information for 2000 with OSM's AML Inventory system. Estimates were compiled by determining the approximate number of people living one-half mile and a mile from an AML site.

OSM's findings show that nearly 1.2 million Americans live within a half mile of an abandoned mine land site considered a Priority 1 or 2 hazard to health and safety. More than 3.5 million Americans live a mile or less from a hazardous abandoned mine site. At both distances, more people are at risk in the eastern United States, particularly in the Appalachian coal-mining region where there are more abandoned mining sites and denser population patterns.

For example, in portions of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, thousands of people are potentially at risk from nearby abandoned mine hazards. But the problem is not limited to urban areas. In another county in rural Pennsylvania with a total population of about 80,000, about 13,000 people—16 percent of the county's population—could be at risk.

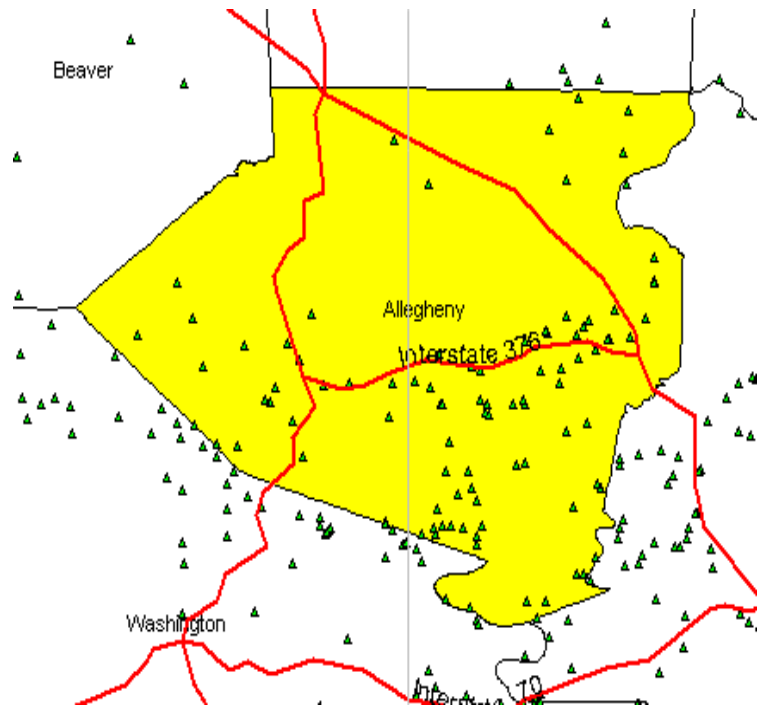
In conducting its analysis, the OSM made several assumptions. First, OSM staff decided to use census tracts for the basis of its study. Census tracts are geographically plotted in square miles, or portions thereof. Second, since only the entire population of each tract is known, not the exact geographic location of each person, OSM had to assume the population within census tracts was evenly distributed. Third, OSM assumed that AML sites are geographic points on the ground represented by latitude and longitude; a half-mile north, south, east or west of that point would constitute one square mile.

The study is the initial step in OSM's analysis of people impacted by Priority 1 & 2 AML sites. OSM intends to further develop its statistical measures in conjunction with other databases to refine its analysis in the future.

The Office of Surface Mining maintains an on-line inventory of known Abandoned Mine Land hazards that States have listed as priorities. Anyone with internet access can examine the Abandoned Mine Land Inventory System (AMLIS) and produce customized maps and information about specific areas. The AMLIS can be found at <http://ismhdqa02.osmre.gov/OSM.HTM>.

OSM's white paper, "People Potentially at Risk from Priority 1&2 AML Hazards," is available on-line at [www.osmre.gov/pdf/wp041703.pdf](http://www.osmre.gov/pdf/wp041703.pdf) or by calling (202) 208-2565.

For additional information about abandoned mine dangers see [www.osmre.gov/keepout.htm](http://www.osmre.gov/keepout.htm). Printed copies of a brochure *Keep Out, Old Mines Are Dangerous*, can be ordered electronically at [www.osmre.gov/order1.htm](http://www.osmre.gov/order1.htm), or by contacting the Office of Surface Mining, 1951 Constitution Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. 20240, (202) 208-2719.



**OSM's on-line mine hazard inventory, the Abandoned Mine Land Inventory System, quickly and easily generates maps of known safety and health hazards from abandoned coal mine sites. Map above shows hazard sites in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.**