

Although the U.S. Office of Surface Mining has helped reclaim tens of thousands of acres of mine lands, significant challenges remain

In many parts of the U.S., surface mining operations provide jobs, tax revenues, and cost-effective fuel for local electric power and manufacturing companies. At the same time, surface mining can also significantly change natural landscapes if mine sites are not returned to the original pre-mining land use. For over two decades, the Office of Surface Mining (OSM) has helped mine operators improve the environmental quality of mine sites by helping them develop post-mining reclamation plans and by funding the clean up of abandoned mines.

When was OSM founded, and what is its charter?

The Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) of 1977 established OSM in the Department of the Interior. SMCRA identified two critical mine land

reclamation areas—abandoned mine lands (Title IV) and active mine lands (Title V). Title IV funds the restoration of mine sites abandoned before 1977, and Title V requires mine operators to minimize surface-mining impacts by restoring mine lands to a condition equal to or better than that which existed prior to mining. OSM works with the states and tribes to develop and implement their mining regulatory and reclamation programs to meet the purposes of SMCRA.

What has OSM done to assure that mine operators properly restore mine lands?

Since its inception, OSM has conducted extensive outreach efforts throughout the coal-producing states, supporting state and tribal reclamation programs and working closely with mine operators to develop sound



Prior to reclamation this abandoned coal mine contained dangerous highwalls, hazardous water bodies, and spoil material. The mining ended in 1952. Photo: Chuck Meyers, Office of Surface Mining.



After reclamation the highwalls have been covered and hazardous water bodies removed. With the land regraded to gentle slopes the grass cover has eliminated excessive erosion and provides a rich up-land wildlife habitat. Photo: Chuck Meyers, Office of Surface Mining.

reclamation practices. Title IV funding has allowed landowners and state agencies to successfully reclaim approximately 250,000 acres of abandoned mine lands, and Title V provisions have dramatically reduced the impact of surface mining projects.

As a result, mine operators have improved much of the affected land identified in 1977, through either reforestation or other reclamation techniques.

Have all environmental issues associated with mine lands been addressed?

Unfortunately, no. According to OSM's records, there are currently approximately 400,000 acres of unreclaimed abandoned mine lands—and hundreds of thousands of additional unidentified acres may remain. At the same time, many Title V sites have the potential to yield multiple environmental benefits through post-mining reforestation.

What is OSM doing now to address these challenges?

Today, OSM is aggressively promoting reforestation on active and abandoned mine lands. The objective is to raise awareness of reforestation as a reclamation option, promote state and federal regulatory approaches that encourage reforestation, and help reforestation projects succeed.

Why should landowners and mine operators want to reforest?

Reforestation is a winning proposition for landowners' and mine operators' bottom lines, as well as for the environment. Reclaimed forests provide value in two ways. First, they provide wood, which can be sold in the form of timber or other wood products. Second, forests perform a wide range of environmental "services." They can sequester significant amounts of carbon dioxide, minimize soil erosion (thereby preventing soil and nutrients from entering bodies of water), conserve water resources, and provide habitats for diverse species.



Mature tree growth on reclaimed mine land. Photo: Chuck Meyers, Office of Surface Mining.