Regulating Surface Coal Mining;
Restoring Mining Landscapes

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Energy from coal helped fuel America's economic and industrial growth and continues to be a major pillar of the nation's security, producing more than half of our nation's electricity.

And while other nations may claim a stranglehold on the world's reserves of oil, the United States controls about one quarter of the world's coal reserves. Coal is vitally important to our nation's future.

Energy Awareness Month is an appropriate time to focus on the role of the Office of Surface Mining in dealing with the environmental consequences of coal mining.

The office was established 25 years ago when Congress, recognizing both our critical need for coal and the needs of our citizens for a clean, safe, and healthy environment, passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, the nation's first comprehensive mining and reclamation law.

The 1977 law established OSM to administer two major programs, one to handle abandoned mine land and another to regulate active surface coal mining.

The Abandoned Mineland Program was enacted to take care of the problems that are associated with coal mining that took place before the surface mining act was passed. In the past 25 years that program has collected more than $6 billion from the coal mining industry; about $4.5 billion of that money has been spent.

With that money about 180,000 acres of abandoned coal mining lands have been reclaimed; 20,000 mine shafts have been filled in and sealed; 2.5 million feet of dangerous highwalls have been removed; and 100,000 acres of dangerous coal refuse piles have been reclaimed or eliminated.

The Active Coal Mining Regulatory Program created a regulatory program in which the state governments -not the federal government-- would be the primary regulators of the coal mining industry. It was a pioneering law that allows the states to carry out the program, if they choose to do so, provided they meet minimum objectives.

Today, almost all of the states that have surface coal mining operations run their own programs. The Federal Government manages the regulatory program in a few states that have a small number of surface coal mining operations.

In the past 25 years, more than 24 billion tons of coal have been produced under the regulatory requirements of this program; more than five million acres have been mined to produce that coal; and most of that land has been reclaimed or is being reclaimed to the standards set by federal law.

The Surface Mining Act requires coal companies to restore the land as they go, which may include restoring habitat for wildlife, protecting streams and creating farmland, forests, and recreational areas. OSM annually recognizes companies whose efforts are exemplary; last month we recognized a dozen such mine operators across the country. They were honored not just for doing the reclamation required of them but also for going beyond the requirements to achieve outstanding landscape restoration.

For example, the Consolidation Coal Company's Burning Star No. 4 Mine in Cutler, Illinois, produced coal from 1973 to 1997 and is now completely reclaimed. The restoration of two major streams was a significant engineering and reclamation accomplishment at this former mine site. Almost nine miles of Galum and Bonnie creeks were restored after being temporarily diverted during the mining.

The high-quality wildlife habitat surrounding the streams includes deepwater, wetlands, flood plain, and upland vegetation communities. About 350,000 trees were planted in association with the stream

restoration. This outstanding reclamation and the added diversity it created have resulted in rapid reestablishment of wildlife populations that will provide a stable long-term land use.

Red River Mining Company, Coushatta, Louisiana, is reclaiming its mine site as a commercial forest, a traditional use of land in this moist lowland landscape. Loblolly pines have been planted since 1991 and are now growing into stands of marketable forests. Smaller areas have been planted in pastureland and permanent ponds have been constructed to increase land value and provide water for cattle. Pond features include hardwoods and grassland species that provide both shelter and food supplies for waterfowl, deer, and other wildlife.

At the Carbon Coal Company's Carbon No. 2 Mine, Gallup, New Mexico, a 300-acre reclaimed site supports a remarkable diversity of plant and animal life. More than 100 vascular plant species have been established including grasses, shrubs, and forbes and revegetation carrying capacity has more than doubled.

The RFI Energy, Inc., at it's Mine No. 208, in Perry Township, Pennsylvania, has already reclaimed 202 of its 212 mined acres. This timely reclamation has eliminated large disturbed areas and prevented soil erosion. Before mining, there were 88 acres of abandoned mine lands with 8,000 feet of highwalls and accompanying spoil piles and mine pits. Today, there is no visible difference between the reclaimed land and the surrounding landscape.

These examples are the kind of mining and reclamation envisioned by the architects of the surface mining law. Those award-winning sites are a clear sign to me that it is possible to achieve the goals of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act.

Today, the problems of the past are being cleaned up. Mining operators reclaim the land as they go. Life in the coal fields is safer and healthier than at any time in our history.

Through the continued partnership of the federal government, state governments, and the coal

industry, America's huge reserve of coal can continue to serve the nation's needs for generations to
come.