

# **Time to finish the job**

## *Abandoned Mine Land fee reauthorization*

### *Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton*

*Harrisburg, PA - February 4, 2004*

Less than an hour's flying time from where I am standing is an abandoned coal mine in Shenandoah Borough. It includes a water-filled pit 3,000 feet long, 1,000 feet wide and 100 feet deep or deeper. It is within sight of several residences and a nursing home. It's not surprising that more than one death has been reported there.

Across Pennsylvania, abandoned mine sites have dangerous, steep embankments—virtually cliffs, where people have fallen to their deaths.

Even in sites where pits are filled with water, ponds are attractive nuisances, but more dangerous than their tranquil surfaces might indicate.

Crumbling banks and steep sides have trapped swimmers.

Unexpected pits surrounded by brush or trees have killed riders in off-road vehicles.

I'm here today to talk to you about President Bush's proposal that will save lives, improve health and safety, and repair ruined landscapes here in Pennsylvania and across the country.

This abandoned coal mine is not just an eyesore. It is a death trap. So are similar abandoned mines in nearby Girardville and those reaching across Pennsylvania from Lackawanna County through Clearfield County to Washington County. In fact, we know of at least 45 deaths and 19 injuries at abandoned mine sites in the Anthracite Region of Pennsylvania in the past 30 years.

I could go on and on. But I don't want to. I don't want these pointless deaths and injuries to go on, either.

For the last 25 years the federal government, state governments, communities and watershed groups have been working to clean up the remnants of coal mining that took place before the reforms of the Surface Mining Act were passed by Congress in 1977.

We have done extraordinary work – and Pennsylvania has always been in the front ranks of this effort. But even after 25 years of effort, we still have almost \$3 billion worth of high priority hazards to health and safety still waiting to be cleaned up in this country.

Here's a startling fact -- about a third of those problems – more than \$1 billion worth—are here in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Even worse, last year the Office of Surface Mining in my Department estimated that nationwide, more than 3.5 million Americans are living less than a mile from dangerous health and safety hazards created by abandoned coal mines. Almost half of those people at risk -- about 1.5 million-- live right here in Pennsylvania.

Think about that. In this whole great nation, almost half of the people living every day with the risk of death or injury from abandoned coal mines are your neighbors, your friends, your family.

The truth is -- even with all we have accomplished -- we are not yet doing our best to stop this needless loss of life. That's what the President wants to change.

Today only 52% of the funds my Department disburses under the AML program actually go to high priority mine reclamations. Because of the promises made 25 years ago when Congress enacted the Surface Mining Act, we are not able today to put our money where it is needed most. Unless this system is changed, it will take 60 more years to finish this job.

The President's plan will make the change we need to the system. It will start putting the money where it is needed most. It will let us finish the job in about 25 years.

What will that mean for Pennsylvania? Under the President's proposed legislation, Pennsylvania will receive an additional \$11.4 million dollars annually to spend on removing hazards caused by abandoned coal mines. That would raise Pennsylvania's share of cleanup funds from more than \$24.2 million to more than \$35.6 million annually.

**The President's legislation will finish the job we've started and finish it sooner.**

We will change the current statutory allocation of fee collections and start putting our money where the problem is. This will make it possible for us to finish the job 2 decades sooner and at a savings of \$3.2 billion.

**The President's legislation will get more people in the coalfields out of danger and in less time.**

By directing more of our money to where the worst problems are 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. Most of those people -- about 45,000 every year, will be Pennsylvanians.

**The President's legislation will provide needed reforms to make the AML program more efficient and effective.**

We will promote re-mining as a cost-effective way of achieving reclamation of abandoned mine lands.

We will also make it easier to use AML money for water projects. The lack of potable water is one of the most serious problems resulting from past coal mining practices and it is time we started doing more about it.

Coal has been mined here in Pennsylvania for 300 years. Even after three centuries of intensive mining, Pennsylvania is still the fourth largest coal producer in the United States.

Pennsylvania coal made the Industrial Revolution possible in the United States.

Pennsylvania coal fueled our victory in World War II.

Pennsylvania coal has powered our nation's rise to a global economic and political power.

When the nation called, Pennsylvania answered. But while all American's benefited from Pennsylvania's coal, the health and environmental cost fell only on Pennsylvanians.

Under the President's proposed legislation, we can put our money where the worst problems are, better protect the people of Pennsylvania and eliminate all these unnecessary dangers to life and limb 22 years sooner.

We can do that with the president's plan.  
It's time to stop these senseless deaths.  
It's time to work better and faster.  
It's time to finish the job.

To put this plan into motion, we need legislation. Members of Pennsylvania's congressional delegation have worked with us extensively to make this happen. We are grateful to both Senators Rick Santorum and Arlen Specter for their hard work and support. Sen. Specter yesterday introduced the language of the initiative in a bill on the floor of the U.S. Senate.

We have with us today, Reps. John Peterson and Don Sherwood. Their support has been vital to this process. Rep. Peterson is carrying the ball on the House side by introducing the legislation today in the House of Representatives.

Now it is my pleasure to turn the podium over to Tim Schaeffer, who is Director of the Central Pennsylvania Environmental Council.

-DOI-