NEWS RELEASE
WASHINGTON, D.C.
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November 19, 2014
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement Releases Studies of Mine Pools Near the North Branch of the Potomac River and Monongahela River.

Report Recommends Ongoing Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment of Underground Pools

(Washington, D.C.) - The Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) has completed two mine-pool studies that characterized large, complex underground systems in West Virginia and Maryland, assessed the risk of polluted discharges and recommended management, monitoring and water treatment strategies. Both reports are now available to the public via the OSMRE website.

The reports were conducted in cooperation with the Maryland Bureau of Mines, which requested the North Branch study, and the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, which requested the Fairmont study. The projects included a multi-year effort to determine the characteristics of the ground water that has accumulated in voids left by mining in two extensive mine pool systems. The reports also present findings of current conditions in the pools, present risk assessments of the potential for polluted discharges into river systems, and recommend ongoing monitoring and management strategies, including continued treatment of water pumped from the mine pools to maintain reduced levels.

"I commend the Maryland Bureau of Mines and the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection for cooperating with OSMRE in this work, which began several years ago," said OSMRE Director Joe Pizarchik. "Theese studies demonstrate OSMRE's continuing efforts with state regulatory partners to develop and use good science to protect people and the environment from the adverse effects of coal mining."

The law that created OSMRE outlines how states that have the primary responsibility to regulate coal mining in their areas must take the lead in these efforts, and how OSMRE should assist them in these critically important efforts.

A mine pool can develop after mining ceases, with the mine voids filling with ground water. Sometimes, as is demonstrated in these two studies, these mine pools could discharge polluted water to the surface unless a reduced water level is maintained in the pool. This maintenance is typically performed by pumping the water from the mine and treating it prior to discharge. The mining companies currently responsible for the pools maintain the water levels and treat the subsequent discharges in accordance with Federal standards.

The North Branch of the Potomac River Mine Pool Assessment report encompasses 12 underground mines that underlie the head waters of the North Branch of the Potomac

River Watershed and span more than 25,000 acres in both Maryland and West Virginia. The North Branch is a tributary to the Potomac River, which is one of the largest rivers along the Atlantic coast and ultimately drains into the Chesapeake Bay. The mine complexes studied include closed, active, and abandoned mine works.

The Fairmont Mine Pool Characterization report describes eight large and several smaller underground mines across 52,000 acres. The entire complex of closed, fully-flooded mines lies underneath tributaries to the Monongahela River -- a major drainage basin including over 7,300 square miles of portions of West Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

These are only two mine pool systems out of many that exist throughout the United States. The results have raised several long-term questions that the Federal government and its cooperating state regulatory agencies must answer.

OSMRE will consult with its cooperative state partners to determine how to proceed with further evaluation of mine pools. OSMRE expects to begin the process in late 2015.

OSMRE carries out the requirements of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act in cooperation with states and tribes. The bureau's objectives are to ensure that coal mining activities are conducted in a manner that protects citizens and the environment during mining, to ensure that the land is restored to beneficial use after mining, and to mitigate the effects of past mining by pursuing reclamation of abandoned coal mines. For instant updates, follow OSM on Twitter at www.twitter.com/OSMRE, or visit the bureau's website at www.osmre.gov.

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