

ABANDONED MINE LANDS

FOR USE BY 2024 PRESIDENT-ELECT TRANSITION TEAM MEMBERS ONLY

ISSUE SUMMARY:

Abandoned mine lands (AMLs) can have an adverse effect on human health and the environment, primarily through water, soil and sediments contamination arising from uncontrolled acid mine drainage and other source materials. AMLs also can pose physical hazards. While there is no comprehensive national inventory of hardrock AMLs across the country, it is estimated that there are several hundred thousand sites nationwide; only a small percentage of these are under EPA's purview.

UPCOMING MILESTONES:

EPA, through the Office of Mountains, Deserts and Plains, addresses cross-cutting issues by coordinating internally and externally to advance hardrock mining cleanups. The office focuses on effective solutions and assists regional offices in achieving milestones in the cleanup of hardrock mining Superfund sites in the American west. An important component of the office is to foster partnerships with other federal departments, agencies, states, tribes, and local communities.

BACKGROUND:

EPA estimates that there are more than 500 mining sites with some connection to the Superfund program, including about 140 mining sites on the Superfund National Priorities List (NPL).

There is no overarching regulatory authority or other organization to oversee and to regulate all aspects of hardrock mining. The absence of such authority adds to the challenge of addressing these generally remote and sometimes very large sites. If left unabated, these sites will continue to pose safety, environmental and human health risks.

Various statutes and regulations at the federal, state, tribal, and local government level apply to mining's environmental impacts. This dispersed disparate regulatory framework makes it difficult to prioritize and to address these sites on a national level.

The primary challenge in addressing these sites is a lack of reliable funding, which not only impedes site cleanup but also makes efforts to inventory, prioritize and to characterize mining sites difficult. These sites, a majority of which have been abandoned for decades or in some cases more than a century, will take substantial time to address.

EPA participates in the Federal Mining Dialogue (FMD) with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and several Department of Interior offices (e.g., the Bureau of Land Management, Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, National Park Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs), the U.S. Department of Agriculture's U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Energy. The FMD has a subcommittee exploring ways to assemble a comprehensive national AML inventory to capture sites tracked by other federal entities and EPA's Superfund program. The FMD has formed a best practices subcommittee to share AML characterization and remediation lessons learned. The FMD has also formed a subcommittee to ascertain the potential for recovering valuable minerals from mining wastes. EPA also chairs an FMD subcommittee for identifying potential federal lands for disposing abandoned uranium mine wastes impacting Tribes and other underserved communities in the Four Corners southwestern U.S. region.

KEY EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS:

☒ Congress ☒ Industry ☒ States ☒ Tribes ☒ Media ☒ Other Federal Agency
☒ NGO ☒ Local Governments ☐ Other (name of stakeholder) _____

Concerns include acid mine drainage impacts on water quality and the potential risk of uncontrolled mine water releases. In addition, the magnitude, risk, complexity, and costs associated with addressing the abandoned mine universe require a collaborative effort between federal, state, and tribal governmental agencies, industry, and environmental organizations. We anticipate continued congressional and press interest on hardrock mining issues.

MOVING FORWARD:

EPA, through the Office of Mountains, Deserts and Plains, works with other EPA offices, other federal agencies, states, tribes, and other stakeholders to address abandoned Western hardrock mine sites. The office advocates innovative scientific, technical, and programmatic-based approaches to facilitate timely, effective, and efficient cleanup and reuse of these sites. The office also coordinates efforts with pertinent EPA headquarters and regional offices, states, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders to remove barriers to Good Samaritan or voluntary cleanups of hardrock AML sites.

EPA plans to continue leveraging federal efforts to develop a comprehensive site inventory, to prioritize sites for characterization and cleanup and to identify or implement effective and efficient cleanup technologies. The federal agencies will continue to work with state and tribal counterparts to develop inventories of AML sites on their lands; develop efficient, and effective characterization techniques and cleanup approaches; and share information, educate, and manage cleanup expectations about AML sites located in highly mineralized mining districts and watersheds across the country. EPA will continue its efforts to streamline the process and allow for the reuse and re-mining of AML sites, waste piles and mine-influenced water to recover valuable metals and critical minerals and offset some cleanup costs.

LEAD OFFICE/REGION: OLEM

OTHER KEY OFFICES/REGIONS: OW, OECA, ALL 10 REGIONS WITH EMPHASIS ON REGIONS 6 - 10