

news

Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs
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ABANDONED MINES ON FEDERAL LANDS LEAVE \$280 MILLION PRICE TAG HOUSE MINING SUBCOMMITTEE CHAIRMAN SAYS

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- It would cost \$284 million to mitigate the environmental, health and safety hazards on federal lands in 11 western states left unreclaimed as a result of abandoned, suspended and unauthorized mining operations, U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV) announced today.

In releasing the results of a U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) investigation to determine the extent of unreclaimed federal land resulting from activities conducted under the Mining Law of 1872, Rahall said: "The findings of this report are especially important because they prove something that has been suspected all along. Federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management do not adequately enforce the few hardrock mining reclamation requirements that are in place, and in fact, often do not even know whether mining is occurring on lands under their jurisdiction."

Rahall is the chairman of the Subcommittee on Mining and Natural Resources of the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs.

The investigation shows that 57% of the 280,000 acres found unreclaimed were disturbed prior to the date federal reclamation regulations took effect while 17% of the acreage was abandoned despite the presence of reclamation requirements. BLM and Forest Service officials were uncertain when the remaining 25% of the acreage was disturbed. The GAO noted that its estimates may understate the full extent of unreclaimed federal land because the investigation only included mining claims active since 1976.

"The results of this investigation certainly do not point to the good stewardship of our public domain," Rahall stated.

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In addition to the environmental problems posed by abandoned hardrock mine lands, Rahall expressed concern over the safety hazards presented by open mine shafts, old structures and mine wastes.

According to the report, since 1974 only \$2.9 million has been spent to reclaim federal land damaged by hardrock mining. Most of the money came from the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund that is financed by a federal fee assessed on every ton of mined coal.

"In 1977, Congress enacted the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act to regulate all aspects of the surface coal mining industry. As part of this law, a special fund was established to reclaim abandoned coal mine lands. I find it ironic that both the eastern and western coal industries are now being made to pay for the past sins of the hardrock mining industry," Rahall said.

According to the GAO report, the vast majority of the unreclaimed and abandoned acreage are on lands administered by the BLM and the Forest Service. The Mining Law of 1872 governs the disposition of hardrock minerals such as gold, silver, copper, lead and iron on public domain lands. The Forest Service's reclamation requirements went into effect in 1974 while the BLM's regulations apply to mining operations after 1981.

GAO found that a total of over 420,000 acres of federal land disturbed by hardrock mining operations are unreclaimed. However, 140,000 of these acres are active authorized mining operations.

The 11 states that examined by the report are Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. GAO found that eight of these states have hardrock mining reclamation requirements that cover federal lands while three--Arizona, Nevada and New Mexico--do not.

Rahall said that last year his Subcommittee on Mining and Natural Resources conducted the first oversight hearing on the Mining Law of 1872 in over 10 years. The congressman has called for the modernization of the 116 year-old-law and anticipates further hearings in the future.