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New Mexico Abandoned Mine Land Program Receives National Recognition

Santa Fe, NM – For a series of projects safeguarding nearly 300 mine openings in Lake Valley, New Mexico, the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE), a bureau within the U.S. Department of the Interior, awarded the New Mexico Abandoned Mine Land Program the 2015 OSMRE National Award. The award was presented at the 37th Annual Conference of the National Association of Abandoned Mine Land Programs in Santa Fe on September 28th.

“The National Award indicates the high quality of work that the New Mexico Abandoned Mine Land Program continues to produce to protect public health and safety at dangerous mine sites while preserving habitat for wildlife,” said Mining and Mineral Division Director Fernando Martinez.



Left to right:

Lloyd Moiola, Compliance Coordinator, Abandoned Mine Land (AML) Program **Fernando Martinez, Director, Mining and Minerals Division** **Raymond Rodarte, Project Manager, AML Program** **John Kretzmann, Program Manager, AML Program** **David Berry, Director, Western Region, Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement** **James Smith, Project Engineer, AML Program**

Judges selected the Lake Valley projects for the National Award for successfully meeting very challenging site conditions due to the large number of dangerous mine openings, the presence of weak subsurface soil and rock, deteriorated timber cribbing, and near-surface underground workings. New Mexico's AML Program utilized creative technical solutions to address the issues at the site. Toroid tire plugs, in particular, were an innovative use of new technology utilizing material that would normally be a waste product. In addition, numerous historic mining structures in Lake Valley were left undisturbed and in a few instances reinforced to prevent collapse.

Under five separate construction projects between 2005 and 2012, the AML Program built measures to safeguard 297 hazardous mine openings. These openings are scattered over approximately two square miles, with the vast majority of those within a half square mile. The Program preserved significant bat usage and habitat in the underground mine workings, both for summer maternity and winter hibernation, by designing and constructing 69 bat compatible closures. Such closures include bat cupolas over shafts (vertical mine openings), bat gates in adits (horizontal mine entries), and airflow closures to maintain ventilation and temperature conditions in the mine workings for the bats.

Because of poor rock conditions near the surface and the presence of several partially collapsed large openings, the Program used an innovative technique developed in British Columbia to stabilize and plug 17 abandoned mine openings by using 140 large, spent tires from earthmoving and mining equipment. Depending on the size and configuration of the opening, the tires, each up to ten feet in diameter, were either stacked horizontally or placed vertically next to each other at the mine entries to form the plugs, which were then covered with earth fill.

New Mexico's Abandoned Mine Land Program works across the state on both public and private lands to identify dangerous abandoned mine areas and to abate their hazards and restore abandoned mine lands and adjacent land and water resources degraded by historic coal mining. The Program is funded by the U.S. Department of the Interior through a fee on active coal production.

It is estimated there are more than 15,000 mine hazards scattered throughout New Mexico that remain un-reclaimed. The New Mexico Abandoned Mine Land Program has closed more than 4,000 hazardous mine openings over the past 24 years and reclaimed numerous coal mine waste piles. Inactive or abandoned mine sites are extremely hazardous and potential visitors to these sites are advised to exercise extra caution when exploring these areas. The best safety practice to follow is to "Stay Out and Stay Alive."

History: Immediately north and northwest of the mining ghost town of Lake Valley in Sierra County lie the remnants of several decades of silver and manganese mining during the territorial and early statehood days of New Mexico. Silver was discovered in Lake Valley in 1878 but mining did not truly spring to life until 1881 on the heels of an intensely publicized and well-promoted speculative mining venture. This led to frenzy of hastily marked claims, as hurriedly built rough-and-tumble frontier mining camp, extensive and continuous prospecting and mining for twelve years, and the construction of a railroad spur. Much of this activity came abruptly to a halt, as it did at almost all

silver mines, mills, and smelters in the western United States, when in 1893 Congress demonetized silver leading to precipitous fall in its price.

After lying dormant for another decade, a second, quieter period of mining began in the early 1900s and extended fitfully to 1955. Although some silver was produced, this later period of mining focused on the production of flux materials and manganese. As is true of so much mining history, mining activity in Lake Valley was largely driven by distant events: initially national monetary policies and the accompanying fluctuations in silver prices and later the demands for the strategic mineral manganese during two major world wars and the beginnings of the Cold War.

Beginning in the late 1990s, the New Mexico Abandoned Mine Land (AML) Program worked with landowners and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to develop the mine safeguarding projects in Lake Valley and to document historic and environmental conditions at the site. The BLM Las Cruces District manages the Lake Valley Townsite as an historic stop along the Lake Valley Back Country Byway and N.M. State Highway 27 and maintains a small museum in the restored community schoolhouse.

Further details on the AML Program's Lake Valley projects can be found at:

<http://www.emnrd.state.nm.us/MMD/AML/LakeValleyAward.html>.

Information on the BLM-managed Lake Valley Townsite can be found at:

www.blm.gov/nm/st/en/prog/recreation/las_cruces/lake_valley_townsite.html.

Information on the 2015 NAAML P Conference can be found at:

www.NAAML P2015.com.

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