

Committee on Resources

Statement

Congressman Tim Holden
Opening Statement
Committee on Resources Field Hearing:
"Abandoned Mined Land Reclamation Needs of the PA Anthracite Fields"
January 24, 2000

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for convening this important hearing today to address a very serious problem we face here in Northeastern Pennsylvania: the problem of increased need for federal assistance in reclaiming abandoned mine lands. From the time that coal was first mined here in Pennsylvania in the very early 1800's, until 1977, there were no federal laws regulating mining operations. When a particular mine site had been mined of all its potential coal, it was abandoned and the mining operation moved to a new site, unburdened by the environmental and safety problems it left behind. As a result, today there is an estimated 1.1 million acres of abandoned coal mine sites in the United States, more than 17,000 acres of which are in my Congressional District.

Abandoned mine sites pose several problems for those of us who live in the communities that surround them. Here in Northeastern Pennsylvania, The Schuylkill, Susquehanna, and Lackawanna Rivers all contain vast areas of contamination from acid run-off and sedimentation from abandoned mine sites. Acid run-off contaminates thousand of miles of rivers and streams nationwide. The contaminated water eventually serves as the municipal water supply for many citizens in both rural and urban areas. In addition, acid mine drainage leads to increased road maintenance costs, due to the corrosive effects of the drainage on culverts.

Abandoned mine sites have contributed to deaths in several states where Children see them as curious playgrounds, rather than perilous danger zones. Highwalls, open shafts, dilapidated mine structures, and water-filled pits present serious health and safety threats to our constituents. Abandoned mine sites are sometimes within easy walking distance from schools and subdivisions and can easily become deadly play areas.

Abandoned mine lands are often located in the most economically depressed areas of our nation. My Congressional District is a text book example of this phenomenon. Cities and towns in Schuylkill County, my home county, thrived during the mining heydays of the 19th Century and early 20th Century, but were often abandoned when mining activity slowed or halted. All that remains today in many once-populated mining communities in my Congressional District are scared lands and a few residents who have stayed. These areas are in desperate need of new industries to replace the jobs that the coal mining industry once provided. But, the ugly, unsafe eyesores that are abandoned mine sites, make it nearly impossible for these communities to compete for industry and tourism.

In 1977, Congress passed, and President Carter signed into law, the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, commonly know as SMCRA. This long overdue act set forth to regulate the mining industry and correct the problems abandoned mine sites create. SMRCA put an end to the practice of

abandoning coal mine sites. Now, coal companies must reclaim lands after they mine them. SMCRA also requires that all active mining operations pay a tax on each ton of coal they produce, at a rate of 35 cents per ton for surface mined coal and 15 cents per ton of deep mined coal. The funds collected from this coal production tax goes into the abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund and are used to finance the reclamation of abandoned coal mine sites.

It is projected that since the inception of the AML trust fund in 1977, cumulative receipts and interest earned from the fund will total more than \$5.85 billion in Fiscal Year 2000. Ideally, this money would all be used for mine reclamation. However, as my colleagues all know too well, the funds collected to finance the reclamation of abandoned mine sites must go through the federal budgetary process each year. Congress annually appropriates money from the AML trust fund. The Office of Surface Mining (OSM) then calculates the distribution to each eligible state and Indian tribe from its shares of state and federal apportionments of AML collections.

The trouble begins with Congress. Each year, Congress fails to appropriate the

full amount of money collected for mine reclamation. This happens each year for several reasons. In the early years, Congress withheld funds because states had not yet demonstrated that they had an effective plan on the table to use those funds for mine reclamation. Today however, even as state after state has demonstrated its proficiency of using the funds to effectively reclaim scarred lands, Congress still holds back the money. It is projected that for Fiscal Year 2000, the trust fund will have a cumulative unappropriated balance of over \$1.5 billion. It does not end there, however. Even if Congress were to appropriate the fund's entire \$1.5 billion surplus, it would only put us on a schedule that would take more than 100 years to fully reclaim all the abandoned mine sites that are out there. That is 100 years that we will continue to stifle the much needed economic development in these financially depressed communities.

We need to do more, not less, to reclaim abandoned mines sooner rather than later. The federal government need to do its share to help. My good friend and colleague, Congressman Paul Kanjorski has a plan for how we can do this. He envisions a plan that would create a demonstration project in Pennsylvania. The plan would raise \$1.2 billion over thirty years from private investors buying tax free bonds, that would be used for reclaiming each and every abandoned mine left in the anthracite fields of Pennsylvania. Mr. Kanjorski has shared his plan with Congressman Don Sherwood and me, and we look forward to working together to make this plan a reality. It is as simple as this, If we can dig a hole, then given the proper resources, there is nothing preventing we from filling that hole.

It is my hope that we will take what we learn here today back to our colleagues in Washington, and resolve to commit the necessary resources to fill all these holes. We are at the dawn of a new century. We must not let the neglect of previous generations in previous centuries hinder the economic growth and vast potential of our generation and our children's generations in this new century.

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