



MINING: Lawmakers eye good samaritan language for abandoned mine cleanup (07/11/2011)

Manuel Quinones, E&E reporter

Even as lawmakers seek to promote more domestic mining of U.S. natural resources, they are also turning their attention to the often dirty legacy of past extraction activities.

The issue will be the subject of a hearing this week in the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources, where panel members will discuss abandoned mined lands. One area of keen concern is helping independent groups -- or good samaritans -- deal with any red tape preventing them from helping with cleanup efforts.

"A good part of my testimony is going to talk about the need for good samaritan legislation and the key provisions good samaritan legislation must contain," said Laura Skaer, head of the Northwest Mining Association, who is scheduled to testify.

Last month a group of Democratic senators sent U.S. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson a letter asking the agency to clarify guidance on good samaritans, especially concerning liability issues. The senators, including Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), cited a Government Accountability Office report that said there are 160,000 abandoned hardrock mines in the 12 Western states and South Dakota.

Lawmakers have also been working on legislation to facilitate mine cleanup efforts. In May, Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.) introduced a bill to protect certain states from liability in connection with cleaning up abandoned hardrock mines (*E&E Daily*, May 19).

Also, Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M) and Rep. Steve Pearce (R-N.M) have introduced legislation to help states use federal dollars to clean up abandoned uranium mines. It would ensure that funds collected under the Abandoned Mine Land (AML) program can be used by states and American Indian tribes to rehabilitate old uranium sites.

Earlier this year, President Obama proposed cuts to the AML program and a termination of mandatory payments to states and tribes that have finished restoring abandoned coal mines. As part of his 2012 budget blueprint, he is also calling for a new fee on hardrock mining to help pay for the reclamation of those mines.

Schedule: The hearing is Thursday, July 14, at 2 p.m. in 1324 Longworth.

Witnesses: Laura Skaer, Northwest Mining Association; Loretta Pineda, on behalf of the Interstate Mining Compact Commission; Thomas Martin Baker, on behalf of Safari Club International; and administration witnesses TBA.