

**PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION
STATE OF NORTH DAKOTA**

NEWS RELEASE

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Commissioners Wefald, Cramer and Clark

For Immediate Release

Phone: 328-2400

Coal mine land reclamation hits major milestone on August 3rd

A federal law that reshaped coal mine land reclamation in North Dakota continues to benefit the state 30 years later.

August 3rd marks the 30th anniversary of the enactment of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 (SMCRA), which set minimum standards for coal mine reclamation and established a coordinated effort between the states and the federal government to prevent the problems associated with coal mining in the past.

The Act has provided North Dakota with partial funding to reclaim abandoned mine lands and regulate active coal mines through the Commission's Reclamation and Abandoned Mine Lands divisions. Coal mined in North Dakota today is done by surface mining, but it was once done by underground mining which left behind dangerous sinkholes.

"Unfortunately some of the first coal mining operations were not required to reclaim the land they used," said Commissioner Kevin Cramer, whose portfolio includes active mine reclamation. "To this day the Commission oversees the reclamation of mines that were abandoned decades ago, as well as active mines."

The Act created the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSM) within the Department of the Interior. OSM oversees the implementation of and provides partial funding for state regulatory programs that have been approved by OSM as meeting the minimum standards specified by SMCRA.

"The federal government realized 30 years ago that to be good stewards of the land, there had to be uniform coal mining regulations and funding provided to states to enforce those regulations," said Susan Wefald, president of the Commission. Commissioner Wefald's portfolio includes abandoned mine land reclamation.

North Dakota enacted its own reclamation law in 1969 and major revisions to it followed in 1973 and 1975. In 1979, the Legislature adopted a new law to comply with the federal act.

More than 30 million tons of lignite coal is mined in North Dakota each year. Mining operations in North Dakota currently disturb around 2,000 acres each year and that same amount is reclaimed each year.

The Commission also administers a permitting and bonding process to ensure that companies currently mining the land take steps to return it back to its original use or to a better condition. After a 10-year revegetation responsibility period, companies can have their bonds released if the land they reclaimed meets all of the standards set by law. More than 6,500 acres of reclaimed lands that were subject to North Dakota's post 1979 reclamation law have received final bond release.

OSM has recognized the state for its mine reclamation efforts. This is reflected in the number of national Excellence in Surface Mining and Reclamation awards that North Dakota mines have received. Since the program was initiated in 1986, North Dakota mines have received fourteen national reclamation awards.

"The state has done an outstanding job ensuring that taking one of its biggest resources out of the ground doesn't scar the natural beauty of North Dakota," Commissioner Tony Clark said.

One of the major changes the Commission has seen in the past 30 years involves technology used to regulate coal mining.

The division has worked with mining companies on the submittal of permit related applications in an electronic format on CD's or DVD's. This information and maps are then converted for use in a Geographic Information System (GIS) to track mining and reclamation activities and conduct technical analysis of plans and data provided by the mining companies.

Information entered into the GIS for several mines include recent high altitude air photos, permit boundaries, roads, stockpile locations, ponds and related features. Information for many final bond release tracts also has been entered. Much of this information is being loaded into mobile computers equipped with global positioning satellite (GPS) receivers that inspectors use when carrying out mine inspections. This allows for accurate tracking and recording of activities during mine inspections.

For more information, contact the Commission at 328-2400.

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