

STANDARDIZED ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

**Prestangen Ranch Coal Fire Project
McKenzie County, North Dakota**

Prepared by the

North Dakota Public Service Commission

In Cooperation with the

**United States Department of the Interior
Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement
Casper Field Office**

(January 2009)

Section I Introduction

A. Need for the Action

The principal objective of this project by the Abandoned Mine Lands Division of the North Dakota Public Service Commission is to extinguish and reclaim a hazardous coal outcrop fire, located approximately 8 miles southeast of the town of Watford City in McKenzie County, North Dakota.

To our knowledge there have been no instances of death or personal injury attributable to the coal outcrop fire. However, this coal outcrop fire did ignite a potentially dangerous grass fire in the spring of 2008 and could ignite additional grassfires if left unchecked.

B. Project Background

The proposed Prestangen Ranch Coal Fire Project is located within the SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 28, T149N, R98W in McKenzie County, North Dakota. The location is further described as 47.694326 degrees north latitude, 103.23644 degrees west longitude.

The coal outcrop fire was ignited as a result of the 1999 Halloween Gap wildfire. The U.S. Forest Service and local firefighting crews worked for weeks extinguishing this fire but thousands of acres burned.

The proposed project site is privately owned and the property owner, Jon Prestangen has requested assistance to have the outcrop fire suppressed. The coal outcrop fire was brought to the attention of the Public Service Commission by the U.S. Forest Service in October 2008. The area that would be affected by coal suppression activities is expected to be less than one-half acre and is located on pastureland used for livestock grazing.

Section II

Description of the Proposed Project and Alternatives

The preferred and most cost-effective option for reclamation is to simply excavate all burning coal and combustible materials, mix the materials with inert (noncombustible) overburden, and enclosure in a burial trench.

Another alternative would be pressurized or gravity-fed foamed cement or fire retardant grout. Projects utilizing foaming mud cement/grout have proven to be a much more expensive method of fire suppression and in consideration of our financial limitations would prove to be cost prohibitive.

Another alternative would be “dousing” with water. This process would entail water flooding of the coal fire site by pumping water through cracks, fissures and fumaroles in an attempt to suppress the fire. This alternative has been attempted many times by various agencies nationally with limited success. Generally, the initial dousing process will lower the temperature of the burning coal and give the impression that the fire has been extinguished, but invariably the fire becomes rejuvenated and often times hotter and more wide-spread than before the dousing attempt.

Another alternative would be condemning the property. This is not considered to be a viable option either, because the landowner wishes to continue deriving income from the property by haying/grazing and farming and condemnation will not eliminate the inherent danger of reignition of grass fires because of the coal seam fire.

The final alternative would be no action. This option does not solve the inherently dangerous problems that exist at the site and is not considered a viable option.

Section III Existing Environmental Documents

The environmental concerns of the proposed project are addressed in an environmental impact statement (EIS) prepared by the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement entitled "Approval of State and Indian Reclamation Program Grants Under Title IV of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977": (OSM-EIS-11, November 1983). Please reference the following documents for further information.

Chapter III, Affected Environmental Rocky Mountain/Northern Great Plains Region

Section 3.5.3.2, Adverse impacts related to subsidence, pp III-29,
Subsections 3.5.3.2.1, 3.5.3.2.2, 3.5.3.2.4, 3.5.3.3.3

Chapter IV, Environmental Consequences Rocky Mountain/Northern Great Plains Region

Section 4.3.3.3, Impacts of deep subsurface reinforcement treatment

Section 4.3.1.1, Impacts of backfilling mine openings

Section IV Site Specific Review

- A. Cultural or historic resource values (the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979; the Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act of 1974; the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended; the Antiquities Act of 1906, Executive Order 11593, concerning the protection and enhancement of the cultural environment; the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978; the Historic Sites Act of 1935; and OMB Circular A-102)**

A letter was sent to the State Historical Preservation Officer on January 2, 2009 requesting concurrence with a "No Historic Properties Affected" determination for the Prestangen Ranch Coal Fire site.

- B. Water quality values (Clean Water Act, as amended)**

Fire suppression and reclamation efforts will be conducted in a manner that will have no significant effect on surface water quality or quantity.

- C. Wetlands values (Clean Water Act, Executive Order 11990, and Army/EPA Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) Concerning the Determination of Mitigation under the Section 404(b) (1) Guidelines)**

No reclamation activities are planned on or near wetlands within the defined reclamation project area.

- D. Floodplain values (Executive Order 11988)**

Areas defined for reclamation activities at the subject site are not located within an identified floodplain.

- E. Wildlife (Endangered Species Act and Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act)**

No threatened or endangered animal species or critical habitats are known to exist on the proposed coal fire suppression site. It is extremely unlikely that this site would be used by any animal species, as it is located on an active coal outcrop fire. Suppression activities will be limited to the immediate area of the coal fire.

F. Prime and unique farmland values (Farmland Protection Policy Act)

There are no prime farmlands within the proposed project area. This area is located on pastureland used for grazing and fire suppression should have no effect on prime and unique farmland values.

G. Recreational resource values (Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Clean Air Act)

There are no lands in the proposed project area classified as Wilderness Area or lands being studied for wilderness. The project area is located on private property.

There are no lands in the proposed project area identified as areas of critical environmental concern.

There are no lands in the proposed project area included in the Wild and Scenic Rivers category. The Little Missouri River is a state designated Scenic River, although our project will have no impact on the Little Missouri River.

There are no parks or areas of critical ecological or aesthetic concern found in the proposed project area.

H. Air quality (Clean Air Act)

The proposed project area is not in or near a Class I air quality region. The only Class I air quality regions in North Dakota are in the Theodore Roosevelt National Park and the Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge. Air quality at the site and surrounding areas will actually be improved by suppression of the coal fire.

I. Socioeconomic factors

The Prestangen Ranch Coal Fire Project Area consists of a very small, but fast-burning coal seam located within pastureland in rural McKenzie County, North Dakota. If necessary, factors such as noise, traffic control and dust suppression will be addressed during the project, but it is unlikely these will be a problem due to its small size and location.

J. Political factors

The proposed project area is 100% privately owned and fire suppression activities have been requested by the landowner.

K. Existing vegetative cover

There is minimal vegetative cover in the immediate project area. The site is located at the base of a clay bank that is mainly devoid of vegetation because of the coal fire.

L. Threatened and endangered plant species

To the best of our knowledge, no threatened or endangered plant species have been identified within the project area. The only federally-listed threatened or endangered plant species known to exist in North Dakota is the Western Prairie Fringed Orchid (*Platanthera praeclar*). Known locations of this plant are within moist, tall grass prairie and sedge meadows of the Sheyenne National Grasslands in the southeastern corner of the state.

M. Anticipated dates of reclamation

It is anticipated that reclamation/suppression will be conducted in February, 2009 and that fire suppression efforts will require 1-2 days of work.

N. Estimated cost of reclamation

The cost of coal fire suppression at this site is estimated at \$2,000.

O. Offsite borrow and disposal areas

If offsite borrow or disposal issues arise, applicable environmental regulations will be addressed through the North Dakota State Health Department.

P. Noise Pollution

Noise Pollution is not anticipated. Should noise pollution problems arise, the North Dakota Health Department will be consulted for remedial action.

Q. Environmental Justice Policy

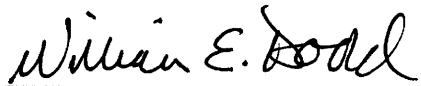
Construction work may result in a slight increase in employment and revenues, but no significant direct or indirect impact on minority or low-income populations is expected.

Section V Consultations

State Historical Preservation Officer

A letter was sent to the State Historical Preservation Officer on January 2, 2009 requesting concurrence with a "No Historic Properties Affected" determination for the Prestangen Ranch Coal Fire site.

Section VI Preparers



William E. Dodd
Assistant Director - AML Division
North Dakota Public Service Commission