

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Holt
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
*“Abandoned Mined Lands: Innovative Solutions for Restoring the Environment,
Improving Safety and Creating Jobs”.*
July 14, 2011

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Cleaning up abandoned mine lands presents a significant challenge. The environmental legacy of abandoned mines should not be underestimated. Even decades after their closure, some mines continue to leach lead, arsenic, mercury and other heavy metals into nearby waterways or drinking water supplies. The problem of abandoned mines is particularly acute in the Western United States, where the Environmental Protection Agency has estimated that approximately 40% of the headwaters in rivers and streams have been impacted by discharges from abandoned hardrock mines, threatening water supplies, increasing water treatment costs, and limiting fishing and recreation activities.

The size of the abandoned mine lands problem is daunting. The EPA and BLM estimate that there may be over half a million abandoned mines locations scattered across the country. In fact, according to the GAO, we don't even know the exact number of abandoned mines across the country.

And we need to take steps to prevent the creation of new abandoned mines by ensuring that mining companies post sufficient bonding and financial assurances to allow the land to be fully reclaimed after the mine ceases operations.

The Environmental Protection Agency is in the process of developing regulations to require financial assurances from mining companies on private lands. But just this week, the Majority approved an amendment to the Interior Appropriations bill that will cut off all funding for the EPA to develop nationwide rules on minimum financial assurances for cleaning up mining operations under CERCLA. Over half of all abandoned mines are on private lands and we should not prevent the EPA from moving forward with this rulemaking.

On public lands, the Bureau of Land Management has regulations that require financial assurances for cleanup. However, the GAO has concluded that current bonding is often inadequate to fully fund all cleanup activities, which can result in new abandoned mine sites.

We should consider adopting policies that require the mining industry, which caused the abandoned mines in the first place, to take responsibility and pay for the cleanup of these sites. This polluter-pays

principle is already utilized for reclaiming and cleaning up abandoned coal mines under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act. Under current law, coal mining companies pay a fee to fund the cleanup of legacy coal mines throughout the nation. In its budget request, the administration included a proposal to institute an abandoned mine lands fee for hardrock mining and I look forward to hearing more about this proposal from our witnesses.

Finally, I look forward to hearing about proposals to encourage voluntary cleanup of abandoned mines by Good Samaritans. Good Samaritan provisions, if crafted properly, have the potential to help reclaim abandoned mines. But let us be clear, we should not gut all environmental laws so that large mining corporations can squeeze more money from public lands under the guise of allowing Good Samaritans to clean up abandoned mines.

With that said, I want to thank all the witnesses for traveling so far today to join us. I look forward to hearing from all of you.