

May 12, 2008

To the editor:

Each year, dozens of lives are tragically lost in recreational accidents on active and abandoned mine property. The number of serious injuries is even higher. These accidents happen to people of all ages in communities across the country. Since 1999, more than 200 people have died in accidents at mine properties that were unrelated to mining activities; 148 of these fatal accidents occurred over the past five years.

Between 2003 and 2007, nearly half of all these fatalities occurred in the 15 to 25 age bracket. Ninety-four percent of the victims were male. By far, most recreational accidents, including 85 percent of known fatal accidents, occur on abandoned mine properties. Drowning is the most common cause of death, accounting for 64 percent of all fatalities. June and July are the most dangerous months, which account for 47 percent of the accidents.

So far this year, there have been numerous such deaths on mining properties. The youngest victim was a five-year-old boy who slipped while playing on a slope at an active rock quarry. The boy's parents were but a short distance away when the accident occurred. Another incident involved two brothers and their best friend who died from a lack of oxygen while searching for gold in an abandoned mine. These accidents could and should have been avoided. Mines and quarries can be extremely dangerous for those not properly trained to be on mine property, and that is why we encourage the public to stay out and stay alive.

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) launched "Stay Out—Stay Alive," a national public awareness campaign to warn outdoor enthusiasts -- especially children -- about the dangers of playing on mine property. The campaign is a partnership of more than 70 federal and state agencies, private organizations, businesses and individuals.

Every year, MSHA safety and health professionals visit hundreds of schools and speak with thousands of students across the country about the existing hazards.

There are about 500,000 abandoned mines and another 14,000 active operations throughout the United States; each and every one of them can be deadly. Mines are located in every state—from small sand and gravel operations to complex underground coal, salt, limestone and metal mines, to extensive surface operations that use some of the largest industrial equipment ever built.

As cities and towns spread into the surrounding countryside and more people visit these remote locations, the possibility of contact with an active or abandoned mine increases.

Underground abandoned mines include hidden shafts that drop hundreds of feet down, covered by decayed and rotten boards that can give way under the slightest weight. Tunnels are prone to cave-ins and may contain deadly gases, flooded sections and poisonous snakes. Unused or misfired explosives can be set off by the slightest disturbance or touch.

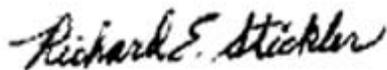
Water-filled quarries have slippery slopes and unstable rock ledges, and just below the surface the water may conceal old machinery and sharp objects left behind after a mining operation closes. Even expert swimmers may encounter trouble in the dangerously cold and deceptively deep waters. Old surface mines, often a popular spot for ATV enthusiasts, contain hills of loose materials in stockpiles or refuse heaps that can easily collapse and cause deadly rollovers.

For the recreational explorer, hiker, swimmer or ATV rider, these hazards are not always apparent. Unfortunately, active and abandoned mine sites have proven to be an irresistible—and sometimes deadly—draw for children and adults.

As we near the end of another school year and our nation's young people begin anticipating their free time, it is especially important that we all do our part to remind them of mine hazards and encourage them to find safer, supervised places to play.

For more information on "Stay Out—Stay Alive," contact MSHA at 202-693-9400 or visit MSHA's Web site at www.msha.gov. Unsafe access to mine sites can be reported by calling our toll-free hotline: 800-746-1553.

Any community with active or abandoned mines, quarries or pits could become the scene of the next tragedy. Please don't let it be yours.



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