



WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL

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September 23, 2024

The Honorable Mike Johnson, Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Steve Scalise, Majority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries, Democratic Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Good Samaritan Remediation of Abandoned Hardrock Mines Act (H.R. 7779)

Dear Speaker of the House Johnson, Majority Leader Scalise and Democratic Leader Jeffries,

Abandoned mines in the West pose various challenges, including adverse impacts to water quality, affecting our drinking water supplies, aquatic life, recreational uses, agriculture, and livestock. Despite efforts from federal and state agencies, and private partners, progress on this issue has been slow and expensive. The Western States Water Council (WSWC) supports your efforts to advance the Good Samaritan Remediation of Abandoned Hardrock Mines Act (H.R. 7779). This bill builds on previous legislation introduced over the past couple of decades.

The WSWC is a bi-partisan government entity created by Western Governors in 1965, and represents eighteen states. Our members are appointed by and serve at the pleasure of their respective Governors, advising them on water policy issues. Our mission is to ensure that the West has an adequate, secure, and sustainable supply of water of suitable quality to meet its diverse economic and environmental needs now and in the future.

As noted in the attached policy Position No. 477, Abandoned Hardrock Mine Cleanup, our member states are supportive of authorizing legislation and appropriations to address the various factors that hinder the ability of states, tribes, and federal agencies to address the monumental task of cleaning up abandoned hardrock mines including: (1) the absence of solvent responsible parties; (2) inadequate funding and resources at all levels of government; (3) the inability of interested third parties to act as voluntary Good Samaritans without incurring the risk of severe liability penalties; and (4) the backlog of inventory efforts to identify the location of and environmental hazards related to abandoned mines and properly prioritize the sites to maximize the benefits of remediation projects.

We appreciate the direction included in H.R. 7779 for EPA to consult with states and tribes in the development of remediation plan regulations, to coordinate with states and tribes on NEPA compliance, and to provide notice to states and tribes of any permit applications and any unplanned releases of historic mine residue. States play a critical role in identifying appropriate sites and sponsors for Good Samaritan clean-ups and evaluating proposed remediation plans. Abandoned mine remediation efforts must comply with both federal and state laws (e.g. ground water quality requirements, and state-specific hardrock mining regulations)

and state agencies are best placed to oversee and ensure project compliance with all requirements. Western states are eager to partner with federal agencies to ensure the success of the Good Samaritan program and to maximize the anticipated benefits.

WSWC recommends that a formal consultation process with states be established as part of the EPA pilot program that ensures that state agencies have an opportunity to shape the program selection criteria and process for permit issuance and oversight. As co-regulators, consultation with states, and in some cases adjacent states, should not occur only at the end of the process.

States should also be protected from liability alongside federal agencies as noted in Section 3. Many western states are interested in leading the clean-up of abandoned mine sites, but need clear Good Samaritan liability protection to move forward with these projects. While EPA has provided helpful guiding principles and tools to reduce risks between prospective Good Samaritans and EPA, those tools do not bind third parties under the CERCLA statute.

Upon successful implementation of the pilot program, WSWC encourages Congress to include additional elements in a permanent Good Samaritan program. First, we suggest that Congress consider providing states that have existing Clean Water Act authority with the ability to administer Good Samaritan permits under a permanent program structure. A state-led permitting program, with oversight from EPA, follows the same model as other federal environmental programs, and provides the best opportunity to achieve optimal environmental outcomes. Second, WSWC suggests that Congress consider allowing more flexibility with respect to maintenance commitments under a permanent program. Although WSWC appreciates the efforts to ensure that Good Samaritan permittees have the financial resources for the operation and maintenance of remediation activities, we caution that requiring applicants to commit to perpetual, long-term maintenance and operation could discourage projects that may otherwise have a measurable benefit and are supported or led by states. Flexibility could be appropriate for some projects and should be allowed subject to approval by the permitting authority. Third, we recommend a program that provides flexibility for states, when acting as a Good Samaritan, to implement creative approaches to finance remediation such as the use of Supplemental Environmental Project funds obtained through settlements of Clean Water Act violations.

Thank you for your leadership and dedicated work on this issue.

Sincerely,



Tony Willardson
Executive Director

cc: Western Members of:

House Committee on Energy and Commerce
House Committee on Natural Resources
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure



**RESOLUTION
of the
WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL
regarding
ABANDONED HARDROCK MINE CLEANUP
Deadwood, South Dakota September
16, 2021**

WHEREAS, the General Mining Act of 1872 allowed individuals to obtain exclusive rights to valuable hardrock mineral deposits on land belonging to the United States without requirements to reclaim the land until the 1970s; and

WHEREAS, hardrock mining has a long history in the West, which is rich in hardrock minerals like gold, silver, and copper; and

WHEREAS, as part of this past, the West contains historically mined and abandoned hardrock mines on public and private land, which were abandoned prior to present day regulation and have no responsible or solvent party to perform the needed cleanup and reclamation; and

WHEREAS, a recent report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO-20-238) found that the United States has at least 140,000 abandoned hardrock mine features on federal land of which 22,500 pose or may pose environmental hazards, including adverse effects to water quality; and

WHEREAS, most of these sites are in many western states with a significant portion located wholly or partially on public land managed by the U.S. Forest Service or the U.S. Bureau of Land Management; and

WHEREAS, significant hardrock mining has also occurred on tribal lands; and

WHEREAS, there could be more than 390,000 additional abandoned hardrock mine features on federal land that have not yet been characterized; and

WHEREAS, many of the abandoned hardrock mines are co-located on public and private land; therefore, consideration should be given to the private land component as well when assessing full mine site cleanup; and

WHEREAS, many states have agencies that administer the CWA, regulate and require financial assurance for reclamation of hardrock mines, remediate impacted waters, and implement abandoned mine programs that are used to identify state-specific priorities with respect to abandoned hardrock mining issues; and

WHEREAS, there are numerous economic, environmental, and social benefits from remediating and reclaiming lands and waters impaired by abandoned hardrock mines; and

WHEREAS, water quality impacts can be severe, with water quality conditions resulting in impacts to drinking water supplies, aquatic life, recreational uses, agriculture and livestock; and

WHEREAS, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has identified developing alternative industrial development projects that are bonded for future cleanup on abandoned hardrock mine sites as an innovative solution to generate benefits and return abandoned mine lands to productivity while considering economic, environmental and social effects; and

WHEREAS, establishing a productive post-mining land use is an important safety and quality of life issue for states, especially where abandoned hardrock mine sites exist with encroaching development, have an increased prevalence of outdoor recreation opportunities such as off highway vehicle usage, or where the sites can meet the growing demand for renewable energy development and storage; and

WHEREAS, the cleanup of abandoned hardrock mines is hampered by two issues – (1) insufficient state and federal resources and (2) concerns about liability, compounded by complex land and mineral ownership patterns in mining districts and the operational histories associated with a given site; and

WHEREAS, Bureau of Land Management officials estimated that with the agency’s current abandoned mine budget and staff resources, it could take up to 500 years just to confirm the presence of physical or environmental hazards present at the approximately 66,000 hardrock mines identified and the estimated 380,000 features not yet captured in its database (GAO-20-238); and

WHEREAS, states, tribes, municipalities, federal agencies, volunteer citizen groups, and private parties that have no liability or responsibility for the sites (referred to as Good Samaritans in this resolution) have engaged in or are interested in voluntary restoration work at abandoned hardrock mines; and

WHEREAS, Good Samaritans currently have potential liability for their voluntary cleanup under the Clean Water Act (CWA), Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) despite the fact that they did not previously operate or own the mine. Such Good Samaritans have expressed interest in voluntarily bearing the costs of the cleanup, and they could provide numerous benefits if they were able to remediate the abandoned mine, but are dissuaded by liability concerns; and

WHEREAS, liability concerns also prevent other active modern mining companies from re-mining or voluntarily cleaning up abandoned mines; and

WHEREAS, “Good Samaritan” bills have been introduced in Congress over the years to protect non-liable entities that are willing to voluntarily clean up these sites from legal liability under CERCLA and CWA; and

WHEREAS, in 2020 the EPA created a new office, the Office of Mountains, Deserts, and Plains, to promote Good Samaritan cleanup efforts and foster partnerships with states, tribes, local communities and other stakeholders to ensure more efficient cleanup of both Superfund and non-Superfund sites in the West, including abandoned mines; and

WHEREAS, in many western states, abandoned hardrock mine cleanup projects on public and private lands can be led by state agency project managers in states with established abandoned hardrock mine lands programs if sufficient funding were available, and allowing deferral of project leads to states on pilot programs can facilitate improved cleanup response times.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Western States Water Council (WSWC) supports increased federal funding and workforce resources dedicated to addressing the backlog of abandoned hardrock mine inventory through both federal and state programs, with a priority on those sites that are contributing to CWA 303(d) impaired waters or have been otherwise prioritized by states.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that increased federal funding appropriated by Congress should not be used to offset or otherwise reduce existing resources allocated to states to work on abandoned hardrock mine issues and should be delivered to state and federal agencies through a clear, transparent, and efficient manner that maximizes project implementation work at sites prioritized by states.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the WSWC supports a rapid and extensive inventory and characterization of environmental hazards and impacts, including water quality, caused by abandoned hardrock mines on federal, state, tribal, and private land across western states and working collaboratively with states and tribes, relying on their expertise to prioritize sites for cleanup.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the WSWC supports efforts by the EPA Office of Mountains, Deserts, and Plains to advance and resolve states' priority abandoned mine issues by helping states to leverage federal programs and enhance collaboration across federal agencies, states, regional, local, non-profit, and private partnerships to create an "all-hands" approach to finding creative solutions, including mining actions identified in EO 14017, for the cleanup of abandoned hardrock mine sites and to accelerate remedial efforts using the most advanced technology solutions.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the WSWC supports exploration of new ideas for moving projects forward, such as using Brownfields' Bona Fide Prospective Purchaser protections or other methods of promoting liability protections until such time that a Good Samaritan program can be established.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the WSWC supports legislation to amend the Clean Water Act to protect Good Samaritans and States from inheriting perpetual liability for the site and to include flexibility and mechanisms for States to implement creative approaches to remediation (e.g., use of Supplemental Environmental Projects obtained through settlements).

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the WSWC supports legislation establishing pilot projects, including pilot projects under state-led programs, to address liability issues for Good Samaritans at individual sites to help pave the way for comprehensive legislation, if comprehensive legislation addressing these issues is not possible in the short term.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the WSWC calls on Congress and federal agencies to develop legislative and administrative remedies to address potential CERCLA, CWA and RCRA liabilities for Good Samaritans, while the federal government should also develop remedies for liabilities associated with re-mining, which deter those best-equipped with technology and expertise (i.e., state and local governments, non-governmental entities, and the mining industry) from improving conditions at abandoned mines.