

Back to life

BY KATHY STILL
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ST. CHARLES – Acid drainage from old underground coal mines killed parts of Ely Creek more than two decades ago.

High levels of acid and iron made it impossible for parts of the Lee County stream to support life.

Considered the worst acid-mining drainage site in Southwest Virginia, it threatened more than 20 freshwater mussel species and 19 species of fish in the Powell River because the creek flows into the river basin.

But a partnership created in 1997 among the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Lenowisco Planning District Commission, Lee County and other regulatory and environmental groups brought Ely Creek back to life.

It took a lot of hard work and \$1.8 million to build a series of bogs and everglades sites to filter the stream.

The money came from federal and state sources such as the federal Abandoned Mine Land fund, a program created nearly three decades ago to clean up environmental damage caused by coal mining done prior to the 1977 federal Surface Mine Control and Reclamation Act.

But the fund is set to expire at the end of September unless Congress reauthorizes a 35-cent-per-ton fee imposed on strip-mined coal and a 15-cent-per-ton fee on underground-mined coal.

Rebecca Watson, assistant secretary for land and mineral management with the U.S. Interior Department, toured Ely Creek Wednesday to see how the fund money is used to clean coal-mining damage.

Watson touted President Bush's plan to reauthorize the program. Bush wants to change the controversial funding method so states with the most troublesome abandoned mine sites – Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Kentucky – get more money.

The current funding formula favors Wyoming and other western states that produce the most coal but have few high-priority abandoned mine sites because most of the mining there took place after 1977.

"The way the money is divided up now is that half goes to states with (high) priority sites," Watson said. "We want to redirect the funds."

Watson, a Wyoming native, admits that most officials back home are "not too excited" about the proposed formula change, but she said representatives from the western states are working with U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., to find a compromise.



Underground mines on both sides of the bog feed acid mine drainage into the containment area. The water is filtered through the bog which helps restore the aquatic ecosystem to the area.

BY DAVID CRIGGER (Bristol Herald Courier)

"It's hard sometimes when you are out west where they are mining all that coal to convince them of the needs here," Watson said.

More than 71,000 acres in Virginia have been affected by mining, and it would take 55 years to reclaim the most dangerous sites at a cost of more than \$115 million. More than \$300 million would be needed to clean up sites considered low-priority.

Just \$55 million of the Abandoned Mine Land money has been allocated to Virginia.

The United States has a total of \$3.2 billion in high-priority sites.

Southwest Virginia localities have used some fund money to build public water systems. Watson said 30 percent of Virginia's fund money is spent on such projects.

Skip Skinner, deputy director of Lenowisco, said Wise, Lee and Scott counties have nearly \$40 million worth of water projects in the works. Local planners use Abandoned Mine Land money to leverage grants and loans from other funding sources, he said.

"It is easy to get other agencies signed on if AML signs up first," Skinner said.

Congress is set to discuss the funding reauthorization legislation after it comes back from its August recess.

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