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Mining and Minerals Division extinguishes two abandoned coal mine fires near Gallup

Long-smoldering fires threatened infrastructure projects, including new water supply line

SANTA FE, NM – Two underground coal fires that were emitting toxic gases and threatening to disrupt infrastructure projects near the City of Gallup and nearby tribal communities have been extinguished, thanks to efforts of the New Mexico Mining and Minerals Division (MMD).

The Gallup Coal Fire Mitigation Project targeted two fires that had been smoldering at least since 2011 at separate abandoned mine sites.

The Enterprise-Brown and Navajo No. 1 mines operated from late-1800's to early-1900's before any environmental regulations existed. In 1891, a mine fire broke out near the Navajo No. 1 fire which lead to the mine being sealed in 1905. It is unclear from the records whether sealing the mine successfully put out the fire.

Staff from MMD's Abandoned Mine Land Program (AML) first encountered the fires in 2011 while taking inventory of abandoned mines across the state. After monitoring the fires for several years, MMD started work to extinguish them after receiving funding from the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. MMD is part of the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department (EMNRD).

"This project is another example of the outstanding work MMD does to mitigate the potential harm abandoned mine spaces can have on our environment," said **EMNRD Sec. Designate Melanie Kenderdine**. "Tackling these underground coal fires is especially important because they have the potential to spark wildfires in addition to other damage."

Kenderdine noted that these reclamation projects also bring economic benefits to local communities, creating jobs across multiple industries.

The AML program staff initially assessed the underground fires using geotechnical drilling and seismic surveys to determine their extents, which was not visible on the surface. The data indicated the Enterprise-Brown fire was burning in the direction of the Navajo Gallup Water Supply Line, a major infrastructure project that will move water from the San Juan River to the eastern section of the Navajo Nation, southwestern portion of the Jicarilla Apache Nation, and the city of Gallup.

The water, which is expected serve both residential and industrial users, will travel via about 300 miles of pipeline to nineteen pumping stations and two water treatment plants.

The Navajo No. 1 fire was burning near several residential communities in an area where a developer is planning a new recreation area catering to campers and hikers.

The fire mitigation project was a collaborative effort involving the land's owner—Gallup Land Partners—the project engineering firm Tetra Tech Consulting, Runyan Construction and the AML program staff.

The project was funded with money included in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which authorized an appropriation of $11.293 billion into the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund administered by the federal Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE). Those funds are being distributed nationally according to a formula based on historic coal production. New Mexico, specifically the AML program, is scheduled to receive $2.4 million annually from this fund for 15 years. The AML program team used $384,543 of those funds to pay for this project.

Heavy equipment was used at the Enterprise-Brown and Navajo No. 1 fires to excavate the burning coal seams. A mixture of benign fill material was then placed in the seams to prevent the fires from reigniting.

Temperatures of the burning coal reached 500° at times. Once it was assured all areas were below 90°, the site was recontoured to blend in with the surrounding topography. Technical experts from Tetra Tech mapped the area using heat-sensing drones to make sure no hot spots remained. Native seed and wood mulch were then applied to the final graded area.

"Mitigating these fires was a priority for us," said **MMD Director Albert Chang**. "With the landowner and city of Gallup proposing additional recreational trails in the area, the conditions will be safer for recreationists, in addition to eliminating the risk to water infrastructure."

"It was nice to part a part of this team working to accomplish this mission of putting out these fires," said **AML Program Manager Leeland Murray**. "They had been burning for many years and we are proud to finally have them extinguished."

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The Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department provides resource protection and energy resource development services to the public and other state agencies.
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Geotechnical drilling (Authentic Drilling) to determine the extent of the coal fires.

Runyan Construction excavating the burning coal at the Enterprise Brown fire. Temperature measurements were taken regularly to identify fire limits.

Runyan Construction excavating the burning coal at the Navajo No.1 fire. Water trucks were used to cool the temperature of the piles and suppress excess dust.

Heavy machinery used to extinguish the coal fire at the Enterprise Brown mine.

Post-fire mitigation reclamation work at the Navajo No. 1 site. Wood mulch was applied over native seed.