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Restoring a watershed and sealing dangerous mine sites earn 2026 Excellence in Reclamation Awards

SANTA FE – Two projects that demonstrated how mining, land and watershed restoration and wildlife habitat management can be interconnected processes—rather than separate, incompatible activities—received 2026 Excellence in Reclamation Awards.

The award winners are the Navajo Transitional Energy Company (NTEC) and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Las Cruces District Office.

NTEC earned its award for restoring a watershed that flows through the permit area for a still working coal mine roughly 19 miles southwest of Farmington. The BLM district office was credited for exemplary safeguarding and reclamation work at the Fluorite Ridge Mine situated approximately 10 miles north of northeast of Deming.

The Excellence in Reclamation Awards, issued annually by the New Mexico Mining and Minerals Division (MMD), recognize innovation in reclaiming land that formerly housed coal, hard rock or aggregate mines. The projects also must comply with federal Surface Mining Reclamation Act standards. The 2026 awards, recognizing projects completed in 2025 or before, were presented during the annual New Mexico Mining Association Conference, held in Santa Fe September 13-15.

The NTEC project took place over the course of a year, beginning in 2024. NTEC, the first tribally owned coal mining company in the United States, restored the 17,581-acre North Fork watershed that is part of the Cottonwood Arroyo. The arroyo flows through the permit area for the Navajo Mine, a still working coal mine located roughly 19 miles southwest of Farmington.

Dual project goals

The Cottonwood Arroyo has three watersheds known as the North Fork, Middle Fork and South Fork. In 2002, NTEC initiated a project to divert the North Fork to isolate the watershed's fresh water from the company's mining activities. As mining activity expanded,

however, the infrastructure built to facilitate the diversion was blocking access to recoverable coal, in addition to requiring constant maintenance.

So, in 2024 NTEC launched the Cottonwood Wash North Fork Restoration project, with two distinct goals: restoring the watershed's drainage channel to its approximate original location and creating easy access to 6.5 million tons of Navajo Nation coal.

Working in concert with the federal Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement and the Navajo Nation Department of Fish and Wildlife, NTEC moved 9.2 million cubic yards of material across the North Fork watershed. That accomplished the goal of returning the drainage channel to its original location. But this project was about much more than just relocating a drainage channel.

The restoration also established a reclaimed drainage channel designed to function as the permanent post-mine landscape. The realigned channel has a longer flow path designed to manage runoff from a 100-year, 6-hour storm event. Wetland and riparian plant species were introduced along the reclaimed channel to promote ecosystem diversity and improve long term channel stability.



***North Fork Reclamation before and after. Note the grass growing after reclamation.
(Photos courtesy of NTEC)***

Established vegetation along the reclaimed channel is already supporting wildlife use. By restoring a drainage system designed to support vegetation and wildlife while reducing long term maintenance needs, the project extends the benefits of reclamation beyond regulatory compliance. These efforts support a sustainable post mine landscape for the Navajo people and the wildlife that depends on it.

“Restoring the North Fork channel to its approximate original location was a significant challenge with a watershed of this magnitude,” said Dacia Jacquez, NTEC reclamation

engineer. "Seeing stormwater flow seamlessly through the reclaimed channel as designed shows that the restoration is working with the natural landscape. Navajo Mine is proud of the Cottonwood Wash North Fork Restoration and what it demonstrates: responsible resource development and environmental stewardship can go hand in hand."

"The Northfork diversion represents balance, Ho'zho (Navajo word), and is the relationship that many Navajo Mine miners take a lot of pride in," added Shawn Smith, NTEC reclamation engineering and land development manager. "This is the challenge we face every day. which is balancing the need for electricity, or mining, and knowing that we can restore the landscape to a sustainable form."

The Fluorite Ridge Mine Safeguard project

The Fluorite Ridge Mine Safeguard project also was a balancing act, calling for closing off abandoned mine sites that posed danger for humans but also were home to various wildlife such as bats and barn owls.

The Fluorite Ridge mining district is located approximately 10 miles north to northeast of Deming. The district contained several mines that produced fluorspar from the late 1880s until the mid-1950s. Once the mines closed, abandoned mining features sat idle, eventually posing a danger to federal employees working in the area as well as cattle grazing on the rangeland.

These sites also became attractive—though dangerous—places to explore for hikers, campers and other people recreating in the area. Death and serious injuries have occurred in dangerous abandoned mine shafts, adits and other mining features that were previously open and accessible.

The primary goal of Fluorite Ridge project was eliminating physical safety hazards at 68 mine features across the landscape. This was accomplished by installing safeguarding measures



This abandoned mine shaft is one of 68 safety hazards that were eliminated in the Fluorite Ridge Mine Safeguard project. The shaft is approximately 7 feet by 35 feet. An expanded metal floor was constructed across roughly half of the opening, covering the deepest portion of the shaft. A vertical three-foot step-up with bat and owl flyways was built, and the closure was completed by adding an additional step to align with the top of the natural alcove and installing expanded metal across the remaining span. (Photos courtesy of BLM)

consisting of three cupolas, 17 bat gates, one shaft grade, 43 backfills, three polyurethane foam plugs and one barbed-wire fence.

Mountain States Restoration was selected as the contractor to complete the mining feature closures. The contract was structured to allow the BLM to approve closure methods, specifications and protocols, including materials such as steel, polyurethane foam and fencing.

The contractor proposed the type of closure they intended to install, submitted their plans, and the BLM reviewed each method. Once the proposed approach met project requirements, the BLM project manager approved it.

Each closure had to be fitted without disturbing any cultural features while still providing the structural integrity necessary to protect the recreating public.

“The Fluorite Ridge Mine Safeguard Project is a great example of responsible reclamation, protecting the public from hazards while maintaining essential wildlife habitat,” said Chris Teske, BLM Mine Lands Program lead.

The award presentation and information on previous award winners are posted on MMD’s website at: <http://www.emnrd.state.nm.us/mmd/ExcellenceReclamation.html>.

MMD warns citizens to please be aware that abandoned mine features contain nothing of value, are unstable, and pose danger, even death, to those who disturb them or enter hazardous openings. The best practice is to Stay Out and Stay Alive.

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