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EMNRD Mining and Minerals Division partners with BLM to complete mine safeguarding project at Cookes Peak

The safeguarding work increases the safety of a valuable recreation area while highlighting governmental collaboration

SANTA FE, NM – The Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department’s (EMNRD) Mining and Minerals Division (MMD) and the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have completed the final phase of work safeguarding abandoned mines on BLM managed lands in the area surrounding Cookes Peak in southern New Mexico. Cookes Peak, at an elevation of 8,408, can be seen from miles around and is a popular recreational destination.

Four different construction contractors were hired for six phases of work. Altogether, 300 dangerous mine openings were addressed on the north and east sides of the mountain from 2014 to 2021. The contractors included Runyan Construction of Silver City, Perikin Enterprises of Las Cruces, MineGates Environmental of Prescott, Arizona, and Hurricane Industries of Joseph, Oregon.

“The area around Cookes Peak is a tremendous resource for the state,” said MMD Director Jerry Schoeppner. “Our division takes pride in partnering with the BLM to make it a safer place to hike and camp while providing jobs to the private sector in completing the construction work.”

The mine features left by the historic operations included pits, adits (horizontal mine openings), and shafts. The New Mexico Abandoned Mine Land Program and the Las Cruces District Office of the BLM reviewed the mine openings and determined which should receive safeguarding work as part of the National Environmental Policy Act clearance work. If animals such as bats and other wildlife were using the mine voids as a home, a steel gate was constructed at the entrance to preserve the habitat and keep humans from entering. Some of the smaller pits and shafts that were poor animal habitat were backfilled with the adjacent waste pile material.

Silver and lead were discovered in the Cookes Range in 1876 and large-scale mines were opened five years later. Much of the lead/zinc/silver production had ended by 1929. However, fluorospar and base-metal production continued until 1965. The production of lead, zinc, gold, silver, and copper ore generated a total of \$4.2 million between 1876 and 1952.

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The safeguarding work was funded by a grant from the BLM and from the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund, a federal grant financed by a collection of fees on coal production throughout the United States and works across the state to identify dangerous abandoned mine areas to enhance public health and safety and restore land and water resources adversely affected by historic mining operations. The law authorizing the fee is scheduled to expire on September 30, 2021. However, legislation has been proposed to reauthorize the fee collection for up 15 more years.

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The Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department provides resource protection and renewable energy resource development services to the public and other state agencies.

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