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HARD ROCK MINING PROGRAMS LAUDED FOR NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION ACHIEVEMENT

BOZEMAN – Two state reclamation programs received awards for exemplary environmental protection efforts in the clean-up of abandoned hard rock mines. The National Association of Abandoned Mine Land Programs (NAAML) publicly recognized the states of Montana and Utah for the nation’s highest achievements in protecting public safety and the environment through innovative abandoned mine clean up practices at its annual conference in Bozeman, Montana.

Mining for hard rock minerals such as gold, silver, platinum, lead, copper, and zinc, in addition to industrial minerals such as uranium, clays, limestone, and borates is an essential piece of U.S. infrastructure. Excavating the land to extract these commodities, while vital, can negatively impact the environment. Prior to the adoption of state and federal laws requiring responsible reclamation of these sites, the sites were often abandoned upon completion.

Today, thousands of dangerous health, safety, and environmental problems exist as the result of abandoned mine lands. Eliminating these problems through remediation or reclamation requires specialized skills, innovative thinking, and dedication.

“The winners of these awards are being recognized as the standard model for responsible abandoned mine reclamation in the country,” said NAAML President Chuck Williams. “The screening criteria for the awards is quite comprehensive. The panel awards points to operations that use creativity in overcoming particularly difficult or unique situations on the ground. We look for modern innovative technology used, the effectiveness of the remediation, and the ability of the operator to acquire different streams of funding to get the job done. It’s not just back-filling a pit with dirt. There is a lot of science, engineering and project management that goes into it and we feel these two recipients meet the highest standard of achievement.”

The award program aims to recognize exemplary projects for remediation at legacy abandoned hard rock mines in the United States in two categories: 1. Remediation of Contamination Impacting the Environment or Human Health, and 2. Remediation of Physical Safety Hazards.

Lead by the Montana Abandoned Mine Lands Program, the McLaren Tailings Reclamation Project in Cooke City, Montana received the award for chemical contamination remediation. The Utah Abandoned Mine

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Reclamation Program's San Rafael Swell Project in central Utah took the prize for physical safety hazard mitigation.

The McLaren Tailings project, which removed 250,000 cubic yards of metal contaminated mine waste from Soda Butte Creek near Yellowstone National Park, was particularly difficult due to its site location with an elevation of 7,600 feet in an isolated alpine area characterized by large winter snow accumulations, limited access, unreliable power, rapid spring runoff, highly variable weather during the summer construction season, and abundant grizzly bears. The summer construction season consisted of approximately 100 calendar days with the end coinciding with the first snowfalls in October. No commercial hauling is permitted through the Yellowstone National Park, so all construction equipment and materials were delivered through Dead Indian Pass, an 8,000-foot mountain pass in Wyoming. The completion of the project put a stop to acidic discharges from old gold and copper mines contaminating Soda Butte Creek, the only metals impaired stream entering Yellowstone National Park.

The San Rafael Swell uranium mine closure project posed logistical challenges as well. Many of the 173 abandoned uranium mine openings remaining from the Cold War era were located high in cliff faces with no roads. Radiation safety protocols, designated wilderness areas, and bighorn sheep lambing are a few of the things that added to the logistical complications. The contractor enlisted helicopters, ATVs, pack horses, human feet, and a great deal of ingenuity to get supplies and labor where they needed to be. The completion of the project has safeguarded all of the known uranium mine openings in the San Rafael Swell protecting public health and safety in an area with many recreationists. Its success is the result of a partnership between the Utah AMRP and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and coordination with local officials. Funding came predominantly from the BLM.

In order to be considered for an award, state, tribal, and federal agencies, or non-profit organizations that address hazards from abandoned mine lands must submit nominations by June 10 each year. For more information about the NAAML P hard rock reclamation award, please visit: www.NAAML P.net or email:

NAAMLPhardrock@utah.gov .

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