

House holds oversight hearing on Abandoned Mine Lands Program

June 7, 2017

On June 7, the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources held an oversight hearing about the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) Abandoned Mine Lands (AML) Program. The AML Program is set to expire in 2021. The hearing aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the AML Program before discussing its renewal in FY2021.

The AML Program's funding sources and its funding dispersion practices were the primary concerns discussed in the hearing. Currently, AML funds are primarily provided through a fee that coal companies pay proportional to the amount of material they extract. If the program is not reauthorized, fee collections will cease on September 30, 2021, and the program will continue until the remaining money is depleted. The AML fund collected \$9.6 billion in fees from 1977-2016 and distributed \$6.5 billion in the form of grants to States and Tribes. An estimated \$10.5 billion of reclamation work remains to be done. The FY2018 budget proposal for the AML program is \$20 million: a \$97.1 million decrease from the FY2017 continuing resolution level.

Glenda Owens, hearing witness and acting director of OSMRE, described that \$1 out of every \$3 distributed to AML reclamation practices is actually applied to the highest priority AML sites. The majority of AML funds are allocated by the states themselves from their federal grants, although the AML program also oversees funding for United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) health plans. Owens said she hopes to channel more money to the highest priority sites, since they make up \$4 billion of the remaining \$10.5 billion in reclamation costs. This funding gap is an oversight issue that OSMRE hopes to address before the vote on renewal of the AML Program in 2021.

Sources: House Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources, U.S Department of the Interior
