

The Dangers of Mine Shafts

Ruth Justis, Ridgecrest Daily Independent, 11-10-09

Letter to the editor

RIDGECREST, Calif. -- It is sad when it takes a tragedy to wake us up to the dangers around us. Last week, a young woman lost her life in an abandoned mine shaft. We all grieve for the family in their loss.

In talking to Linn Gum of the Ridgecrest Bureau of Land Management, I learned that there are tens of thousands of these sites in the 1.9 million acres that office oversees.

"Some of the mines are on public lands, others are on private land, but all of them are dangerous. They pose a real and present danger to anyone using public lands for recreation," Gum said. "The BLM has been trying to educate the public for over 15 years about the dangers of entering a mine. Most of them are at least 100 years old and they simply are not safe. In addition to the aging timbers, etc., you have to consider the likelihood of an earthquake. Even a mild shake could cause a landslide or tons of rock and dirt to trap anyone inside. You don't want to go there."

It costs the BLM an average of \$10,000 per site to remediate an old mine. Each site must be checked to see if it has become a habitat for an endangered species and appropriate measures taken to protect the wildlife. Bat gates are installed on some sites; some are backfilled; others have fences constructed around them. Others are considered historical sites and must be preserved as such.

"When we go out to check on some of these sites, we find that the locks on gates have been cut off, fences knocked down, and people continue to use the tunnels as party sites. There are those who think it is cool to explore old mines. My advice to you is to stay out and stay alive," Gum said.

"Since I've been with the BLM, we have remediated 500 to 600 mines. My goal is to reach 1,000 before I retire; but that still leaves another 30,000 or more out there. Ridgecrest and Barstow are the two worst hot spots in the state for abandoned mines.

Gum also warns the public not to jump on a pile of tailings. If you see a pile, it's because there is a hole on the other side, he said. Motorcycle riders are especially cautioned to stay on the trails and not jump over piles without checking for holes.

"We all have to be pro-active about this. Teach your family to stay out of mines," Gum said. "Over the years, I've had to tell half a dozen families that a loved one had died in a mine shaft. I never want to have to do that again."