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Emery mine site all cleaned up
Reclamation: After 100 years of providing coal, the location has now been refreshed
By Mike Gorrell
The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

When the bulk of the coal ran out, and no buyer could be found for what remained, Utah Power faced a challenge - reclaiming a mine site that had been in operation for a century.

Now, six years and nearly \$800,000 after restoration work began, the Emery County canyon that contained the Des-Bee-Dove Mine's surface facilities shows few signs of 100 years worth of industrial activity.

Where conveyor belts and tipples once stood, there are now clumps of native grasses, forbs and shrubs. A waste pile of rock and coal nearly 150 feet deep has been removed, rejuvenating the canyon's original drainage. This fall, small pinyon and juniper trees will be backpacked into the site to enhance the natural appearance even more.

"It looks dramatically different than I envisioned at first," said project manager Chuck Semborski, a geology and permitting supervisor for Utah Power's subsidiary, Energy West Mining Co. "It's kind of enjoyable to do that side of the [mining] work."

Miners first began chipping away at the canyon's coal seam in the late 1800s, over time creating three mines - the Deseret, Beehive and Little Dove - that eventually merged into one.

Because of the site's remoteness and elevation (7,500 feet) in East Mountain, systematic mining did not begin until The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints took over the operation in 1938 to supply coal to Brigham Young University, church hospitals, chapels and needy families.

Ownership shifted to Utah Power in 1972, when the utility needed its own reliable coal supplies to fire up the massive Huntington and Hunter power plants outside of Huntington and Castle Dale.

A decade later, Utah Power had 200 employees removing 1.2 million tons of coal from the mine. But its days were numbered and production ceased in 1986, two years after Semborski had led unsuccessful efforts to drill a ventilation hole from Little Dove to 27 miners who died in a fire at the adjacent Wilberg Mine.

Unable to find a buyer for what coal remained in the mine, Utah Power started reclaiming the site in 1999. But Semborski quickly discovered some surprises.

The main access road into the site wasn't actually dirt, he discovered, but a big pile of waste coal covered with a few feet of top soil.

"It literally filled the entire drainage," said Susan White, the state Division of Oil, Gas and Mining official who oversaw the reclamation work.

So after Semborski sold off the surface facilities to a salvage company which dismantled them and hauled them away, he arranged for another contractor to remove the waste coal and save the dirt for use in reclamation.

"We thought we'd find some neat antiques in going through that pile," he said. "But we didn't. They were real frugal in those days. They didn't throw anything away that was valuable."

Utah Power crews re-established the original drainage, covered the mine portals and reseeded the site, including the access road. All that remains to be done is to remove a sedimentation pond lower in the canyon.

"They have done a great job," White said. "They have a few more years for the vegetation to develop on the site. But I would certainly hope that at some future date, they will get a national award for the work they've done."

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