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ABANDONED MINES – ADVENTURE OR TRAGEDY?

(Salt Lake City, Utah) -- For more than a hundred years abandoned mine shafts have gaped open in the hills and mountains of Utah, waiting to swallow up anyone careless or curious enough to get too close. The promise of adventure is difficult to ignore.

“An abandoned mine can contain numerous hazards,” explained Luci Malin, administrator of the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining’s Abandoned Mine Reclamation Program. “The list includes unstable roofs, rotting timbers, dead or poisonous air, deep shafts, old explosives and many other hazards. It’s a tragedy waiting to happen.”

Since the early 1980’s that search for adventure has killed ten Utahns and injured two dozen more. Some would argue that the number of deaths and injuries are small compared to many other forms of recreation. “We have no way of knowing just how many people explore old mines,” says Malin. “I would say considerably more people engage in other activities. But that doesn’t matter if you happen to be the victim, or family member of a victim.”

Utah has a rich mining heritage with a legacy of an estimated 17,000 abandoned mines. The Abandoned Mine Program seeks to identify those mines that pose the greatest risk and close them to human access. Such closures range from simply backfilling a hole to erecting steel-bar grates that keep people out but allow bats continued access to important habitat.

Engineers work with archeologists and biologists and follow a recognized process of evaluating old mine sites and holding public meetings prior to commencing any work. The process ensures that cultural and historical significance is maintained and wildlife issues are addressed. Most importantly, no mine is closed without the landowner’s permission.

“That’s an issue that is often overlooked by those who want to venture into old mines,” notes Malin. “There is a significant liability risk for the landowner on which an old mine sits. Exploring an old mine often means you’re trespassing, yet that does not protect the landowner from the possibility of a multi-million dollar lawsuit.”

Enjoy Utah’s mining heritage but do it at a distance. When it comes to abandoned mines, Stay Out – Stay Alive!

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