ABANDONED HARDROCK MINES

Information on Number of Mines, Expenditures, and Factors That Limit Efforts to Address Hazards

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service, the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and National Park Service, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identified at least 140,000 abandoned hardrock mine features, such as a tunnel, on lands under their jurisdictions. Of these, about 67,000 pose or may pose physical safety hazards—danger of injury or death—and about 22,500 pose or may pose environmental hazards—risks to human health or wildlife from long-term exposure to harmful substances. Agency officials also estimated there could be more than 390,000 abandoned hardrock mine features on federal land they have not captured in their databases, and agencies are developing more comprehensive information about these mines.

Forest Service, BLM, National Park Service, EPA, and Interior’s Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) spent, on average, about $287 million annually to address physical safety and environmental hazards at abandoned hardrock mines from fiscal years 2008 through 2017, for a total of about $2.9 billion (see figure). Of this total, the agencies spent about 88 percent ($2.5 billion) addressing environmental hazards, and about $1 billion was reimbursed by private parties, such as former mine owners. Federal officials also estimated that it would cost billions more to address these mines in the future.

Federal Expenditures to Address Abandoned Hardrock Mines by Agency, Fiscal Years 2008 through 2017, in Nominal Dollars

Nearly all of the federal and state agency officials and stakeholders GAO interviewed cited availability of resources and legal liability concerns as factors that limit efforts to address hazards at abandoned hardrock mines. Federal and state officials said their backlog of work is greater than what can be done with available staff and budgets, but they have taken steps to collaborate to help leverage resources. State officials and stakeholders, such as conservation groups, said they want to help address environmental hazards that they did not cause at abandoned hardrock mines. However, they generally do not do so because they are concerned about becoming legally responsible for the entire cost of addressing contamination at an abandoned mine if they attempt partial cleanup. EPA officials said they are considering new ways to encourage volunteer participation, in addition to existing administrative tools.