

State, mine owner planning permanent fix for accident site

By Lynda Guydon Taylor
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A steep cliff at an abandoned mine in Bentleyville likely will be bulldozed and the site will be fenced off to prevent tragedies like the fatal all-terrain vehicle accident on Sunday, said state mining officials and the property owner.

In a series of meetings likely to be held over the next several weeks, government and officials from Mittal Steel USA will work out the best way to mitigate the problem, said Tom Rathbun, a spokesman for the state Office of Mineral Resources Management.

"[The accident] is a tragedy. We want to do everything we can to prevent this from happening again," said David Allen, a spokesman for Mittal Steel, the Chicago company which acquired the abandoned mine last month from International Steel Group. ITS had acquired the old Beth Energy Mine in a bankruptcy, Allen said.

David and Lori Creek were killed when the all-terrain vehicle, or ATV, they were riding went over a cliff, with at least a 60-foot drop, and plunged into Pigeon Creek, drowning the husband, 30, and wife, 32.

The Washington County accident accounts for the second

and third ATV deaths this year at abandoned mine sites in the state, Rathbun said. A 50-year-old Fayette County man died at an abandoned strip mine in Somerset County when his ATV rolled over on him on a steep dirt pile, he said.

Dirt piles erode because there is no vegetation, they shift and slide and may look attractive to riders because of the smooth surface but can be very hazardous, Rathbun said.

With 10 percent of Pennsylvania's residents living within one mile of the more than 250,000 acres of abandoned mines in the state, accidents at those sites can be a huge problem, he said. Last year, there were two deaths at abandoned mine sites in Pennsylvania out of 35 nationwide, caused by swimming, climbing and ATV accidents.

Between 1982 and 2001, at least 4,541 Americans were killed riding ATVs, according to the Consumer Federation of America, an advocacy, research, education and service organization.

To encourage safety, the U.S. Department of Environmental Protection, in cooperation with the federal Mine Safety Health Administration, operates a "Stay Out, Stay Alive" program.

To remedy the situation in

Bentleyville, Mittal and engineers from the Bureau of Mine Reclamation will look into erecting a barricade to keep people off the property and leveling the pile.

Rathbun said that is not as easy as it may sound, however, because a creek runs below the cliff. Engineers must take into consideration every aspect of the project so that work doesn't end up damaging aquatic life downstream and degrading the creek.

Rathbun said the object of the project is a permanent fix.

He estimated the cost of reclaiming abandoned mines statewide at \$15 billion. Reclaiming the entire 11-acre site Mittal owns is estimated to cost \$1.8 million, and would include leveling it, regrading the surface, reseeding and fixing the creek.

Since the accident, Mittal has posted "no trespassing" signs and erected an orange plastic construction fence to deter intruders.

Bentleyville Mayor Tom Brown applauded the company's quick response to the problem.

"I think things are moving along," he said.

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