

Mine site warnings sought

● The Sierra Club is behind a measure that would fund warning signs at potentially deadly old shafts covered by desert brush.

By RHONDA BODFIELD
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More than 100,000 abandoned mine sites around Arizona need to be safeguarded, says an environmental group that plans to introduce a bill next year to help inspectors identify hidden shafts that have caused deaths in the past.

The Sierra Club is working with state mine inspectors to push for legislation next session that would

tack another \$10 on top of the \$100 filing fee that individuals and mining companies pay each year to keep a mining claim active.

That money would be used to find more abandoned mines and to put up warning signs on property.

With about 30,000 active claims, the plan could generate \$300,000 a year for the state Mine Inspector's Office.

"What kind of fee would be im-

posed is really yet to be determined, but \$5 or \$10 wouldn't break anybody's bank," said Chuck Shipley, a spokesman for the Arizona Mining Association.

Shipley said his group is still deciding whether to support the bill, although, "it may be wise to set up some type of program to at least inventory and locate where these so-called abandoned mines are."

Identifying old mines has become difficult in recent years because cities in Arizona keep spreading out, assistant state mine inspector Bill Hawes said.

At the same time, more people

are using off-terrain vehicles to explore remote mining sites that were once thought inaccessible.

In the Tucson mine inspector's office, hangs a photograph of a truck swallowed by an abandoned mine near Oatman.

Two teens had taken their parents truck out for a joy ride and

hadn't seen the mine in the middle of a dirt road. It cost \$5,000 to get a crane to pull it out.

MINE, continued/5A

● Old tunnels are filled with danger. 5A

REPORTING ABANDONED MINES

The Arizona State Mine Inspector has statutory authority to locate abandoned mines and require them to be closed or barricaded.

If you spot one while hunting, hiking or camping, mine inspectors ask you not enter it, but report it by calling (602) 542-5971.

1996 AZ abandoned mine warnings

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Mine site warnings proposed for state

Continued from 1A

The stories go on:

- In December 1992, two Tucson teens were stuck in a mine shaft near West Bilby and South Palomino roads after climbing down 160 feet to the bottom of the mine.

- In 1990, a 15-year-old survived a fall down a 30-foot-deep vertical mine shaft near Tombstone after standing on the edge, chucking rocks down the hole.

- In 1986, a 15-year-old Phoenix boy fell to his death down a 160-foot-deep mine shaft near Gleeson.

- In 1980, two men were driving while intoxicated near the University of Arizona's San Xavier Mining Laboratory when their car crashed to the bottom of a 95-foot mine shaft. They spent four days in the hole.

- A Florida tourist in 1977 fell to his death 145 feet into an abandoned mine near Tombstone.

- In 1970, an 8-year-old California boy rode his motorcycle onto a mound near Kingman and died after a 140-foot fall into a mine.

To fix the problem, legislation was passed in 1987 giving the mine inspector's office jurisdiction over old mines. But Hawes said the office has never had enough money to identify where they are or do much about them.

The Bureau of Land Management provided the state with a small grant to map abandoned mines on BLM land.

And last session, the state forked over a minuscule amount of general funds for fences and signs.

In the history of the state, about 1 million mining claims have been filed - about 300 of which are active sand and gravel pits and mines generating coal, copper and gems, said David Hamm, with the Tucson branch of the state Mining Inspectors office.

A conservative figure, he says, is that there are at least 100,000 abandoned mines that could potentially cause safety hazards.

Other department estimates show 125,000 such mine openings exist statewide.

"Unfortunately our mandate is to inspect active mines," Hamm said. "We're at a catch-22. We couldn't get funding until we knew how many there were and we don't know how many there are without funding."

So far, the agency has surveyed about 6,000 old mines.

The state's Risk Management Office did not have information on how many times the state has been held liable for people falling into abandoned shafts, but Hamm said the figure is low.

Part of the reason is that if the mine is on privately owned ground, the primary responsibility falls with that owner.

And if the mine is on public land, whoever holds the mineral rights will be held responsible for any accidents.

If the Legislature decides to commit more funds to identifying mines, inspectors say they still can't account for human stupidity.

Hawes said it is a never-ending ordeal to keep the abandoned sites posted properly - even though sign removal is a felony punishable by a fine or imprisonment.

"Vandalism is getting to be so bad, and people so obstinate and stupid, they ignore signs and tear them down," Hawes said.