

Press Enterprise • Sunday, December 8, 2024 3

Abandoned mines pose a number of hazards

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Swaths of Pennsylvania and many other states are riddled with old, unstable mines that can cause the earth to suddenly give way and threaten people and property.

That's what searchers in Westmoreland County, just southwest of Pittsburgh, feared led to the death of Elizabeth Pollard, 64, Pollard and a young granddaughter were looking for a lost cat when she went missing Monday evening. At about the same time, a sinkhole appeared roughly 20 feet from where Pollard parked her car, in an area above an old coal mine. The granddaughter was found safe inside the car hours later.

Her remains were recovered Friday, a State Police spokesperson said. Trooper Steve Limani said Pollard was found at about 11 a.m. approximately 30 feet underground, some 12 feet from the opening of the sinkhole. Limani said she apparently fell onto a cone-shaped pile of debris created by the crumbling mine, then rolled or otherwise moved toward the southwest to where her body was recovered.

Difficult to predict

Mine subsidence has caused billions of dollars in damage in the U.S. In Pennsylvania, where mining dates to the late 1700s, coal was mined in nearly half of the state's 67 counties and there are at least 5,000 abandoned underground mines, leaving behind hazards officials say can arise at any time.

There are as many as 500,000 abandoned mines nationwide — far outnumbering those that are still active, according to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration. They dot the landscape of coal country and sprawling Western states where mining was common. People have died falling into them, and some miners have tried to hide victims' bodies by dumping them in open mine shafts.

The sinkhole in Westmoreland County appears to have resulted from a catastrophic collapse, suggesting the roof of an old mine gave way suddenly after sagging for years, said Professor Paul Santi from the Colorado School of Mines Geology Department.

"If it's dropping say, half

an inch a year, you can use satellite information to detect that and monitor if it is getting worse or not," Santi said. "But you can also have these really quick ones that are harder to predict. That's what happened in this case. You have this roof collapse and overnight a sinkhole appears."

The Marguerite Mine authorities believe resulted in the sinkhole was last operated in 1952 by the H.C. Prick Coke Co., according to the state Department of Environmental Protection. The coal seam in the area is about 20 feet beneath the surface.

That's relatively shallow, adding to the chance of a sudden collapse in areas where the coal had been removed, leaving a void likely filled with air, water or debris that had washed in over time, Santi said.

The sinkhole was teardrop shaped, Santi said, with a small opening above a larger cavern. If the mine collapse had been deeper, it would have been cone-shaped and taken longer for the disturbance to reach the surface, he added.

Prevention

Some mines used supports such as steel arches to prevent collapses. Others left pillars of coal in place to support the roof, but they don't always prevent settling over time.

The state Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation will examine the scene to see if the sinkhole was caused by mine subsidence, spokesperson Neil Shadler said.

Drowning, gases

Old mines pose myriad dangers, with 381 people killed and 152 injured at abandoned mine sites nationwide between 2000 and 2013, according to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

In many cases, their owners simply walked away from coal or precious metals mines when they became uneconomical to operate and declared bankruptcy. That left behind safety hazards and costly pollution cleanups public agencies must handle.

Victims can drown in flooded shafts, get lost in underground tunnels or perish from poisonous gases present in many old coal mines. Mine shafts can extend hundreds of feet beneath the surface and often are unmarked. State and federal agencies have sealed off many old mines. But more are discovered every year and officials have yet to conduct basic risk analyses on most of the abandoned mines on federal land.



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS

Kanny Pollard, 75, above, holds a photo from a vacation he and wife Elizabeth took to Florida about 10 years ago. Elizabeth Pollard had last been seen Monday evening looking for her cat near a restaurant half a mile from her home in Marguerite.

This is the sinkhole, at left, where the remains of Elizabeth Pollard were found Friday.

Berwick student charged in attack, police allege

BERWICK — A student has been charged after an attack in the Berwick High School cafeteria, police say. Around noon on Nov. 6, Angely Morales, 18, of 300 Grant St., got in a fight with another person, a citation states. The other combatant was not named, nor was a reason for the fight explained. Morales was charged with disorderly conduct.

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