

Dangers Await Those Who Venture onto Abandoned Mine Sites

Last March 23, Michael Mills, almost 2-years-old, wandered away from his backyard in Central City, CO, when his babysitters went into the house to answer the phone.

Finding the boy gone when she returned, she and her boyfriend began searching for him. Near an abandoned gold mine shaft opening less than 100 yards from Michael's home, the searchers found small footprints, but no sign of the boy. Later rescuers found Michael dead 200 feet below the surface. He was buried on his second birthday.

Each year, according to the Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), abandoned mines, sand pits and quarries claim the lives of adults, teenagers, and children. They have been the sites of numerous drownings, suffocations and head, neck and back injuries. Most of the deaths and injuries to trespassers on abandoned or idle mine properties occur during spring and summer and involve explorers, prospectors, hikers, picnickers or curious youngsters.

The warning not only applies to the Rocky Mountain region states of Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming, but any part of the country people visit on vacations this season, said Vernon Gomez, district manager of MSHA's Metal/Non-metal Division, located in Lakewood, CO.

There are many potential dangers facing persons who venture onto idle surface or underground mining properties. These include hazards such as slippery slopes, icy waters and unknown underwater structures at quarries, unstable material in sand pits that may collapse about those who walk on it, and lethal, oxygen, deficient air, explosive gases and poor roof conditions in

some underground mines.

"Abandoned properties may be especially dangerous during the spring when thawing from winter storms occurs and there is a danger of falling rock and loose dirt associated with pits and quarries," said Gomez.

"Additionally, idle or intermittently operated underground mines may have oxygen-deficient air, an explosive atmosphere or poor roof conditions. Everyone must stay away from these life threatening properties.

In August 1988, three children ages 5, 8 and 13 were drowned in a Maryland quarry after going for a swim in what they apparently thought was a safe pond. A rescue worker speculate that they had either slipped off the steep bank and gotten in over their head or were swimming and had been caught in the heavily-silted bottom. Also that month, a Colorado man was slightly injured when he fell 30 feet down a mine shaft while hiking with friends.

In October 1988, eight teenagers spent 20 hours lost in an abandoned clay mine in West Virginia when they became disoriented while exploring mine passageways. One of the youths were injured when he slipped and fell.

Over the years, MSHA has alerted mine operators and the public about the potential "death traps" that await unwary trespassers on mine properties and has worked closely with local mining communities to have abandoned mine openings sealed and fenced off from the public. The agency also conducts intermittent safety awareness campaigns on this subject among state and local governments, the public and the mining industry.