

Abandoned Mine Lands Problem

More than a century and a half of mining in California has created an estimated 47,000 abandoned mine land (AML) sites. Historical mining and ore processing at these AML sites have resulted in the generation and disposal of millions of tons of mine wastes to the land and waters of California. The interaction of climate, hydrology, geochemistry and weathering processes on these wastes has resulted in the release of hazardous substances that may pose threats to human health and the environment. AML sites also may pose threats to public safety due to physical hazards associated with mining activities (e.g., shafts, tunnels and pits). Most of these AML sites are located on federal lands, with a smaller number located on private lands and state and local public lands. Sources of information on this vary, but they typically consist of historical records (such as mine claims, documents about past mining operations, and plat maps (detailed maps showing property boundaries (e.g. parcels)) and notes from field reconnaissance. Databases have been developed from local, state and federal agencies, but only a limited number of these AML sites have been evaluated to date.



California's growing population is encroaching on areas of historic mining activities and is resulting in the development of properties for residential, recreational and commercial uses on and near former AML sites, which may pose a public health threat. Likewise, as the overall population of California grows, there is increasing pressure on the use of local, state and federal lands for recreational purposes where numerous AML sites exist. Additionally, mine wastes such as mill tailings and waste rock from AML sites have reportedly been exported off-site and used extensively as fill and in road construction in and around many historic mining communities.