



# PROTECT CONSERVE ENHANCE

## Abandoned Mine Lands



by *Douglas J. Austen, Ph.D.*  
*Executive Director*  
*PA Fish & Boat Commission*



“They’re just not making any more streams, so take care of what you have” is a phrase right out of the environmental movement of the 1970s. There’s a lot of truth in it. The phrase implores us to be good stewards of our resources.

However, hidden throughout the coal regions of Pennsylvania are opportunities to create essentially new streams. There are more than 184,000 acres of abandoned mine lands in Pennsylvania. It is estimated that 1.4 million Pennsylvanians live within one mile of an abandoned mine site. In fact, 44 of our 67 counties have at least one abandoned mine land site. Clearfield County, for example, has 588 sites affecting nearly 24,000 acres. Each year the newspapers report on deaths from falls, drownings, or other injuries that happen at these sites. They affect us in many ways—all bad.

The Commonwealth has about 4,000 miles of streams that are basically dead because of abandoned mine drainage. For the most part, these streams have no life in them. The bottoms are covered with material such as iron oxide, which gives them that sickened orange look. Others, though, appear to be the perfect trout stream—clear water flowing over a seemingly perfect stream bed, but with a pH of 4, poisoned to lifelessness.

It should be obvious that there is an important opportunity in these sites for anglers and boaters. We are all concerned about crowding of our waters—too many people fishing on waters that are increasingly hard to access because of posting and for-profit private enterprise. What if we could simply create more fishable waters? What if we could have more healthy streams for canoeing or for floating in a tube? What if we could have streams with diverse insect communities, providing food not only for fish but also for salamanders in the rocks, and birds that, as we are now better understanding, depend on the stream insect life as an important part of their food supply? Bringing “dead” streams back to life is something all anglers and boaters would support and advocate.

In the West Branch Susquehanna River, the Fish & Boat Commission estimated that a clean-up of the streams would lead to economic value of nearly \$70 million per year. And in fact, there are examples in the Commonwealth of success stories about dedicated groups working with government agencies to address the problems and renew life in the water. Examples include Stony Creek and the Little Conemaugh River in Somerset and Cambria counties. Extensive work is starting to benefit streams in the northcentral parts of the state, waters such as Babbs Creek (a major tributary to Pine Creek), Dent’s Run, and Bennett Branch.

Much of the clean-up of mining waste has been funded through the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund. This fund was created in 1977 to reclaim abandoned mines and clean up waterways affected by coal mining before 1977. The mechanism was a tax of 35 cents per ton on surface-mined coal and 15 cents per ton on deep-mined coal. Over the years, Pennsylvania has received more than \$520 million from the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund. These funds have been used to restore more than 18,000 acres of land and 100 stream miles.

Yet, more is possible. Each year, over \$300 million is deposited into the federal account. But for the past several years, only about \$150 million has been spent. This difference has created a back account balance that only Warren Buffett could relate to: About \$1.5 billion. This whole mess created a stalemate in Washington in recent years as the western and eastern states battled over the division of funds. Most current coal mining is in the west, whereas most of

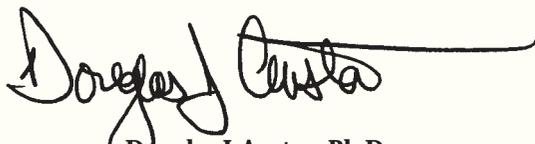
the damage from past coal mining is in the east. Basically, the west didn't want to pay for the history lesson taught by the east.

Earlier this year, a deal was brokered in the form of Senate Bill 2616, which all sides agreed to support. The result, among other important benefits to coal miners, would be about \$1 billion to Pennsylvania over 16 years to address some of the priority restoration needs, in-

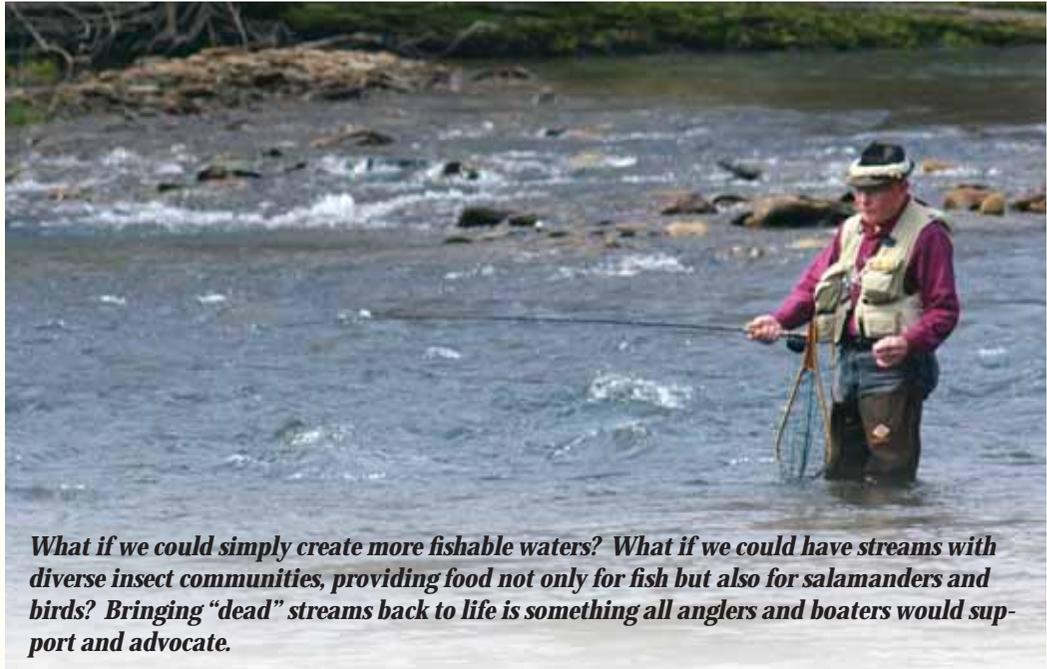
cluding abandoned strip mines, spoil piles, mine entries, and mine shafts. These mines and additional underground mines all contribute to the untreated discharge going into our streams.

The sad news is that Congress failed to move on this bill before it broke for elections. The powers that be in the Senate attached some bad legislation to the good language in S2616 that all but killed its chances for passage. We all need to be in contact with our legislators and with the House, Senate, and White House to encourage this bill's support and passage.

If there is one action that can improve fishing and boating in Pennsylvania, it is to clean up the remnants of the Commonwealth's coal mining past—a legacy that built a nation and won two world wars but has left scars behind for all of us to deal with. We can do this and we must. Take the time to make your views known in the halls and offices of Washington.



Douglas J. Austen, Ph.D.  
Executive Director



*What if we could simply create more fishable waters? What if we could have streams with diverse insect communities, providing food not only for fish but also for salamanders and birds? Bringing "dead" streams back to life is something all anglers and boaters would support and advocate.*

photos-Art Michaels



*Mine drainage leeches iron oxide and other elements into streams. These ingredients poison stream life and taint the stream bottom orange. Dried pollutants also ring rocks in white.*