

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106680](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Millions of Americans live less than 1 mile from an abandoned coal mine, according to OSMRE. These sites can pose risks to human health and the environment.

The AMLER Program aims to aid communities impacted by abandoned mine land in six Appalachian states: Alabama, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. Three Tribes with established programs for abandoned mine land reclamation are also eligible for funding: the Crow Tribe, the Hopi Tribe, and the Navajo Nation.

House Report 117-400 includes a provision for GAO to study the administration of the AMLER Program. This report examines, among other things, the information OSMRE collects on the program's performance and challenges identified by program officials, state and tribal participants, and others. GAO reviewed agency guidance and reports and interviewed officials from the program and all six states and three Tribes. GAO also visited Pennsylvania, the Navajo Nation, and the Hopi Tribe.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that OSMRE (1) systematically track reliable and complete information on time frames to review and approve project proposals and (2) document roles and responsibilities of OSMRE staff in headquarters, regional, and field offices, and seek opportunities to streamline reviews. OSMRE agreed with all four recommendations and described steps it plans to take in response to each recommendation.

View [GAO-24-106680](#). For more information, contact Cardell Johnson at (202) 512-3841 or JohnsonCD1@gao.gov.

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ABANDONED MINE LAND

Opportunities Exist to Improve Interior's Economic Revitalization Program for Coal Communities

What GAO Found

Congress appropriated nearly \$1 billion from fiscal year 2016 to fiscal year 2023 for the Department of the Interior's Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement's (OSMRE) Abandoned Mine Land Economic Revitalization (AMLER) Program for grants to states and Tribes. For example, a project funded by the program in Pennsylvania reclaimed abandoned mine land and expanded a botanic garden, according to OSMRE.

AMLER-Funded Project in Pennsylvania at the Pittsburgh Botanic Garden



Sources: Bob Hedin, Hedin Environmental (left photo); GAO (right photo). | GAO-24-106680

Participants identified challenges related to OSMRE's long time frames to review and approve project proposals. For example, officials from Virginia told GAO that OSMRE took over 1,100 days to review a project proposal. Ultimately, the applicant withdrew it. As a result, \$1.6 million was tied up with that project and could not be awarded to other projects during that period, according to Virginia officials. Time frames to review and approve project proposals may vary in part due to projects' complexity, according to program officials.

OSMRE does not systematically track time frames to review and approve projects. Regional office staff track some information, but they do so in different ways. GAO found the information is incomplete and unreliable. For example, many projects were missing dates for steps in the process, and others had dates listed that were not in chronological order. In September 2022, Interior's office began evaluating the need for a dedicated system to track projects that is automated and web-based. The office requested but had not secured funding for this effort, as of March 2024. Program guidance established a goal for OSMRE to, as practicable, provide an initial assessment of project proposals submitted by states and Tribes within 60 days. By tracking reliable information in a consistent way, OSMRE can know whether it is meeting this goal and identify opportunities for improvement to streamline its process.

The office also has not documented internal policies and procedures related to the administration of the program, according to regional officials. For example, OSMRE has not documented the roles and responsibilities of headquarters, regional, and field office staff, and headquarters staff often duplicate work that regional staff are already doing, according to these officials. By documenting such policies and procedures, OSMRE could help ensure that it is not duplicating efforts and identify opportunities for improvement to streamline its process.