



Good Fences Make Safe Neighbors

By Mark Ray

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When Bill Durbin surveys the landscape around Las Vegas, Nev., he doesn't see glittering rows of casinos or stark desert beauty. Instead, he sees abandoned mine openings dotting the land around his fast growing city. As chief of southern Nevada operations for the state's Abandoned Mine Lands Program, Durbin is responsible for finding and securing those openings.

Over the decades, mining companies have abandoned tens of thousands of mines across Nevada. In some cases, the companies have filled the openings with dirt or otherwise secured them, but many have been left completely open.

"Openings are typically six by eight feet with timber framing for support," Durbin said. "There might be ladders attached, which are typically dry rotted. You try to stand on what might as well be toothpicks or balsawood."

Moreover, vegetation grows up around many openings, effectively disguising them. Mounds of waste rock piled around an opening can further hide openings from view.

In 1975, for example, two pre-teen motorcyclists rode up and over such a mound near Searchlight and fell to their deaths. Just last year, a woman received moderate injuries when she fell down a 35-foot winze (a vertical shaft between two levels of a mine) in Carson City. In fact, nearly every year someone dies or is injured from a fall down an abandoned mine shaft.

The problem will only increase as cities like Las Vegas expand. "When I was out doing inventory work, some abandoned mines were seven miles away from the nearest house," Durbin said. "Now, they're less than one mile."

Volunteers (primarily students from the University of Nevada at Reno) are still discovering new sites, too. As of last fall, the Division of Minerals had identified and ranked 10,687 hazardous mine openings and secured 8,361 of them. Landowners and developers secured many of those, but responsibility for the ones on public land (which accounts for 83 percent of the state's total area) falls to the Division of Minerals. And that means it falls to Durbin and his counterpart in northern Nevada.

While abandoned mine openings represent job security for Durbin—he jokes that he'll get them all secured by the time he's 117 years old—they also represent a major challenge. So Durbin was thrilled back in 1992 when a 13-year-old Boy Scout named David Loring approached him and asked, "Can I fence some mines for my Eagle Scout project?"

"With an estimated 50,000 abandoned mines around the state and with our mandate to get them fixed, it seemed like a good fit," Durbin said.

It was also a good fit for Loring. The son of two geologists, he had long been fascinated by geology—and by the numerous mine openings near his Reno home. "I went exploring in places I probably shouldn't have," he said.

And so, in September 1992, Loring and a team of volunteers secured eight mine sites in Washoe County. Around each opening, they constructed a barbed-wire fence and posted warning signs.

Loring's project was a success. He became an Eagle Scout later that year and went on to earn a master's degree in engineering and technology management from the Colorado School of Mines. Today he works as a mining engineer for the Climax Molybdenum Company.

But the story doesn't end there.

Another Scout heard about Loring's project and asked if he could do something similar. And then another did. And then another. Thus began a unique partnership between the Division of Minerals and the Boy Scouts that has lasted for more than a decade.

Since 1992, 58 Eagle Scout candidates have worked to secure mine openings across the state. In all, they have secured 321 sites and repaired 25 others. Last year alone, Scouts secured or repaired 51 separate sites. By contrast, all other volunteers typically take care of one or two sites a year.

After dozens of Eagle Scout projects, the Division of Mines has figured out how to support Eagle candidates effectively. A staff member works with each candidate to find a group of mines that are fairly close together and then visits the sites with the candidate so he can survey them and determine what materials he needs. The agency provides all the materials and has a staff member onsite at all times—along with the Scout's 15 to 20 volunteers—to provide technical support, monitor safety, and make sure the fencing and signage meet state requirements. (Nevada's "Good Samaritan" law protects the Scouts from liability.) Each year, a Scout project is featured in Durbin's annual report.

"We are extremely grateful for all the help the Scouts have provided for us," Durbin said. "I just can't tell you what a pleasure it is to work with each and every one of

these guys. It gives you all the hope in the world for the future. It's sure an honor to work with these young men now."

It can also be an honor to work with them later. Durbin ran into David Loring—his first Eagle Scout—at a mining conference a couple of years ago and had the chance to tell him about all the projects that had followed his. "He was totally shocked when I told him where we were," Durbin said.

"It's really a cool thing to have happen," Loring said later. "It's great to be a part of something so big."