

Moshannon Creek Watershed Association

Policy Statement on Re-mining in the Moshannon Watershed

As our nation and world gradually shift from the predominant use of fossil fuels to an emphasis on energy sources with lower carbon emissions, it is understood that coal mining will continue during the transition. In this transitional period, there is a coal mining method that can be used to produce water quality improvements. That method is the re-mining of existing abandoned deep and surface mines that are discharging contaminated water. The Moshannon Creek Watershed Association (MCWA) recognizes that re-mining is an important component of the overall strategy to return the entire Moshannon Creek watershed to a healthy condition. Tributaries and segments of the Moshannon can be restored through the construction of treatment systems on key acid mine discharges, but to address the entire length of the stream, complicated and expensive long-term treatment is needed for those largest discharges that do the most damage. But rather than treat those discharges at full strength forever, an efficient way of dealing with them is to attack them at the source, and that is where re-mining can come in. By going back in to finish recovering those coal seams that were worked but inadequately closed up decades ago, or sometimes simply abandoned, modern reclamation practices and use of alkaline materials can be applied to drastically improve, reduce or even eliminate many of the mine discharges that are causing the most damage today. After re-mining, any discharges that may still remain would be much more easily dealt with.

Since it was formed in 2020, MCWA has been studying the Moshannon watershed in segments, from the headwaters down, in order to determine the best way to tackle the problems in each reach. Recently, we have focused on the areas downstream of Hale and have concluded that short of building a water treatment system capable of treating the entire flow of the creek, re-mining is the best option for ultimately restoring that area to a healthy condition. The area is riddled with deep mines beneath and covered with refuse and inadequately reclaimed scrub woodlands above. Mine discharges upflow directly into the bed of the stream, making capture and treatment nearly impossible. In conditions like this, MCWA believes that the best approach is to address the sources that make up the very valley through which the creek flows by re-mining the stream surroundings wherever it can be done in an environmentally sound way.

Though MCWA has been focused mainly on the study of the stream segment below Hale, it is clear that a similar re-mining approach could be instrumental in other sections of the watershed, namely, in the area between Osceola Mills and Sandy Ridge, poorly reclaimed areas along Coaldale Road, and other areas further downstream.

Although MCWA recognizes the benefits and encourages the use of re-mining to reduce or eliminate the disastrous effects of abandoned mines and mine drainage, we do also recognize that re-mining is a complicated, expensive and time-consuming undertaking. Re-mining is generally beyond the scope of what governmental agencies will undertake on their own, and therefore is an activity that has fallen to private mining companies to carry out. In that respect, private companies need to be able to perform re-mining operations in a way that is beneficial to their businesses. MCWA encourages the use of governmental incentives and/or contracts to facilitate and encourage private companies to take on environmentally beneficial re-mining operations that would otherwise be untenable for businesses to carry out independently.

Re-mining is only one part of a multi-pronged approach necessary to address the legacy of abandoned mine problems in the watershed, and it will not replace the apparent need for active mine drainage treatment plants to neutralize large and severe discharges where re-mining and other approaches are unworkable or cannot be applied.