

GEOLOGIC RESOURCES DIVISION
NATIONAL NATURAL RESOURCES PROGRAM CENTER
Monthly Report - May 1995

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GENERAL

Geologic Resources Division: Reorganization Results in New Name and Functions - As part of the recently approved Washington Office reorganization, the Mining and Minerals Branch has moved from Land Resources back to the Associate Director, Natural Resources Stewardship and Science. The office has been renamed the Geologic Resources Division, with expanded geologic science responsibilities, including geologic hazards, research, caves, paleontology, and shoreline processes. The division is now part of the National Natural Resources Program Center, along with Air Resources, Water Resources, Environmental Quality, and the Natural Resource Information Divisions. Lindsay McClelland, a geologist formerly with the Wildlife and Vegetation Division, is joining the group and will spearhead our initial efforts in the new geologic areas. Other current minerals staff members will also take on broader geologic responsibilities. As with many other NPS offices, the Division will be "reengineering" in the coming months to try and develop the most effective methods to carry out our various responsibilities in these times of shrinking budgets and staff resources. We will solicit formal and informal field input throughout this process. (Shaver)

New U.S. Geological Survey Projects in National Parks - As part of its ongoing reorganization, the U.S. Geological Survey has offered to commit funding and staff to selected new geology projects in the national parks in FY 96. In response, regional offices were asked early this year to seek proposals from parks addressing critical needs in geologic resource management and interpretation. An NPS evaluation panel, including staff from parks and the Geologic Resources Division, met to rank the proposals May 19-21, generating a list of high-priority projects for consideration by the USGS. Nine of the high-ranking proposals have been initially selected by the USGS for project work. In the coming weeks, USGS and park staff will be developing more detailed work plans for these projects. If funding and staffing levels permit, it may be possible for the USGS to undertake some additional NPS projects in FY 96, but it will probably be mid-

summer before they can be identified. News of project commitments will be forwarded to parks and field offices as soon as information is available. (McClelland, Higgins, Steensen)

CERCLA Course Sheds Light on AML Issues - Staff attended the WASO Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) course in Yellowstone in late May. The course addressed the CERCLA processes with regard to abandoned mine sites in and outside the NPS. CERCLA requires different levels of site surveys, depending on the possibility of discovering releases of hazardous substances. The WASO Hazardous Substance office, the HazSub group, is encouraging at least Level I surveys at AML sites and some preliminary testing to see if site conditions warrant a Level II survey. It is likely that many, if not most, AML sites will need at least a Level II survey to adequately determine whether CERCLA might apply. More detailed surveys may also be warranted, depending on the findings of these surveys. The course emphasized the need to evaluate lands proposed for boundary expansion or additional NPS parks, including those that contain historic mining sites. This concern is due to the significant liability of any landowner or manager of a CERCLA site, regardless of who contaminated the site. The HazSub group is encouraging direct contact between their office and parks on this issue. The NPS HazSub office is providing legal assistance via an official attorney, Shawn Mulligan. The course was held in Yellowstone in order to generate ideas from a spectrum of field staff. These ideas are to help Yellowstone prepare for a meeting with the EPA regarding the McLaren tailings. (Geniac)

Cogs are Bogged Down in the External Planning Project - Upon request, the U. S. Forest Service annually provides a Forest planning schedule to the Geologic Resources Division. BLM provides the same type of information on resource area planning schedules. Such plans often include minerals planning. Advance knowledge of planning stages for external agency units allows parks to proactively address minerals development concerns. Last year, because of the noted need for advanced notification, the division sent a listing and map of the areas undergoing planning and the parks that may be impacted by such plans. The information went to the minerals coordinators in the regions. The division plans to issue this information annually, preferably in February of each calendar year. An upgrade of software, the reorganization of boundaries, and the changing duties of staffs across the Service have caused the delay of this year's information. The information will be provided next month to each of the System Support Offices. We thank you for your patience! (Geniac)

First Annual AML Report Indicated NPS Deserves a Pat on the Back, But Much Remains to be Done - The report period covers the 1994 calendar year. In 1994, 34 AML projects were conducted in the service for \$1,379,000. Of this amount, approximately \$890,000 or 65 percent came from the NPS operating budget and \$424,000 or

35 percent came from founding sources outside the NPS. The reported costs primarily reflect direct costs such as purchase of materials, rental of equipment, and travel expenses and do not include indirect costs such as overhead, division staff salaries, administration, etc. Monies were spent in almost all aspects of the program -- e.g., research, inventory, site characterization, hazardous material removal, hazard mitigation, wildlife habitat protection, historic preservation, and reclamation. The major focus has been, and continues to be, aimed at on-the-ground site analysis and remediation. Considering the limited funds at the program's disposal, the 1994 achievements are impressive. However, when faced with a \$165 million long-term program cost and an immediate health and safety mitigation backlog of approximately \$40 million, the \$1.4 million spent in 1994 is a drop in the proverbial bucket. Copies of the report can be obtained from the Geologic Resources Division. (Higgins, Smith)

NORTHEAST FIELD OFFICE

Long Lost Operator Returns to Plug Orphan at New River Gorge -

The operator of an abandoned well inside West Virginia's New River Gorge has unexpectedly applied for a permit to plug the well. The action was a surprise in that the state considered the well to be orphaned, meaning there was no operator of record. The well is on Federal surface land located adjacent to the city of Fayetteville's municipal baseball diamonds. Although abandoned, the well was never plugged, and it was possible to open a wellhead valve and light a mini-flare. Just the thing for those summer barbecues at the park. Ken Stevens, New River Gorge resource manager, was notified by the state that the operator had applied for a permit, and promptly notified the division about the proper procedure. While everyone agrees that in the interest of public safety the well needs to be plugged as quickly as possible, the regulations at 36 CFR 9B still need to be followed. The division created a template for the operator to use for the plugging and reclamation plan that should streamline the process. The operator will still need to provide a bond for the plugging. The division will work closely with the park to follow through with the plugging. No word on why the operator chose to come forward. (Heise)

INTERMOUNTAIN FIELD OFFICE

Abandonment and Reclamation of Oil and Gas Site is Underway at Padre Island -

Comvest Energy successfully plugged and abandoned their Laguna State Tract No. 180 well during the week of May 1. The well was located in the Laguna Madre immediately adjacent to a spoil island. Production facilities on the spoil island include oil and brine storage tanks, separators, a gas compressor, pumps and lines for loading oil to a barge, and a work shed. Comvest performed the work under a comprehensive plan of operations for plugging the well, removing production facilities, and reclaiming the disturbed area. The division's

petroleum engineer along with Padre Island's mineral manager witnessed each of the plugs. Well conditions complicated the plugging operations requiring on-sight approvals to change from the approved procedure. The technical service provided by the division met two goals. First, it provided resource protection by assuring that the well was plugged to Federal and state requirements. As is often the case, representatives from the Texas Railroad Commission did not make it out to the site. Second, it provided a chance for informal training for park staff on plugging operations. Removal of production facilities on the spoil island and site remediation is continuing under the Seashore's oversight. Reclamation of the site is complicated by hydrocarbon contaminated soil. Ultimately, the site will be restored to bird nesting habitat. (O'Dell)

Partnership with the Department of Energy (DOE) May Pay Off For Uranium Mine Reclamation - The Grand Junction Project Office (GJPO) of DOE completed a preliminary analysis and prepared a report on the abandoned uranium mines in NPS units on the Colorado Plateau. The analysis was based on information provided by the division, old Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) reports and reclamation practices currently being used to reclaim uranium mines on DOE leases. The GJPO estimates it will cost \$1,700,000 to reclaim 33 sites in the Colorado Plateau Parks. The report contains a table that breaks down the cost estimate on a site-by-site basis. The GJPO is still considering our request to perform a radiological study at each of the abandoned uranium mine sites in the Colorado Plateau Parks. The GJPO cannot respond to the request until some resolution is made on the agency's budget. (Higgins, Burghardt)

Oil, gold, and Sand Make for Curious Mixture at Great Sand Dunes - While conducting core sampling of a disseminated gold deposit in Colorado's San Luis Valley last year, Lexam Explorations, Inc., encountered oil in shallow bore holes. They were drilling 4 miles north of the Great Sand Dunes on the Luis Maria Baca land grant. The company is now proposing an intensive oil exploration program and have budgeted their entire exploration budget towards oil, although they have no experience in that commodity. A series of seismic lines has been obtained. Sources in the industry are skeptical, as the west side of the San Luis Valley has been explored extensively with no success. To compound the confusion, the entire land grant was sold recently. Nonetheless, Lexam has submitted two applications for drilling permits with the state of Colorado and will likely go ahead using its own money. Four areas are targeted, one of which is inside the park boundary on private acreage that can be accessed without crossing any Federal land, thereby avoiding the regulations at 36 CFR 9B. The only possible regulatory handle is through the state Oil and Gas Conservation Commission. The division has been in touch with Superintendent Bill Wellman to determine his preference on how to proceed. Spud date for the first well, located about 6 miles northwest of the Monument, is June 15. (Heise, but much of this information comes courtesy of Mark Chatman, a Bureau of Mines

geologist working on the park's water resources report.)

Searching and Researching at Glen Canyon - The division participated in "step down" research activity at Glen Canyon, representing geologic and mineral related issues. This is a process in which an overriding goal is agreed upon at the beginning of the meeting and a series of progressively more discreet topics step down from this goal to culminate in a list of needed research projects. Participants included representatives from the park, WRD, the NBS, the USGS, several CPSUs, the BLM, and probably several other acronyms. After 3 days, these five topics were identified as essential research needs: an integrated visitor use study, a water quality/contaminant study, a fish study, a T&E study, and a comprehensive GIS addressing geology, vegetation, wildlife, soils, and paleontology. The division agreed to review the extent of existing geologic maps of the area as part of the GIS project. Any impacts stemming from mineral development would be considered as an element of the GIS. No time frame has been established. (Heise)

Viking Sails Into Glen Canyon - Viking Oil Company, long-time holder of oil and gas leases beneath Utah's Glen Canyon and Capitol Reef, met a BLM imposed deadline to survey, stake, and conduct an archeological survey along their proposed access route and pad location near the Purple Hills. By doing so, Viking avoided having their lease suspension lifted, which would have effectively ended any possibility that a well would be drilled inside Glen Canyon. The leases were issued prior to Glen Canyon coming under NPS administration and have been a point of controversy for over two decades. As it stands now, the park will perform T&E and paleontological surveys along the same route as a precursor to the necessary environmental assessment (EA) for the well permit. The park has indicated they would like division participation in preparing the EA, starting with a visit to the proposed well site sometime this summer. Industry sources have indicated to the division that Viking may have trouble finding investors to drill a highly speculative wildcat well. (Heise)

Orphan and Grandview Mines in Grand Canyon Inspected to Develop Mitigation Alternatives - Branch staff and a radiation specialist from the U.S. Bureau of Mines (USBM) joined Heather Stone (Hazardous Materials Coordinator for the Western Region) and park staff to inspect Orphan Mine. Orphan Mine was one of the nation's richest uranium mines, now abandoned and located along a heavily-visited trail on the South Rim near Grand Canyon Village. The purpose of the inspection was to develop a scope of work for a CERCLA Site Investigation, following up on recommendations in a 1994 preliminary assessment which recommends further radiological characterization. The scope of work will recommend long-term air monitoring for radon and its progeny, and an extensive gamma radiation survey of the surface facility, including contaminated areas outside the present perimeter fence which have never been properly characterized. When characterization is completed, a

comprehensive mitigation plan will be prepared and reclamation funding will be pursued. The Grandview Mine was also inspected and measured for closures, which will include bat gates on the appropriated openings to accommodate a maternity roost of *Plecotus townsendii* (Townsend's big-eared bats). (Burghardt)

SOUTHEAST FIELD OFFICE

Division Changes Policy Toward Certificates of Deposit in Lieu of Performance Bond, Immediate Application at Big Thicket - Kriti

Exploration recently acquired a production facility located outside the Jack Gore Baygall/Neches Bottom units of Texas's Big Thicket. Although the facility is in a privately-owned commercial forest outside the units, the bottom hole locations for three wells are all beneath the park. Additionally, about 1 mile of road accessing the site crosses the park. These two conditions, along with concerns over spills into the surrounding waterways that would quickly impact park resources down stream, triggered the 36 CFR 9B plan of operations requirement. The plan emphasizes spill response and maintenance of the access road and bridges leading to the site. The division had few comments about the plan, no doubt reflecting the efforts by the park's resource specialist Paul Whitefield with Kriti to produce a plan that would address park concerns. The one substantive comment we did have, addressed Kriti's proposal to use a Certificate of Deposit (CD) in lieu of a performance bond. In the past, CDs were specifically deemed not acceptable under any circumstances for satisfying the performance bond requirement. The division recently reviewed this prohibition and determined that CDs are in fact acceptable. However, before accepting a certificate of deposit tendered by an operator, the Field Director must verify that the instrument satisfies a series of standards. These standards are available from the division now, and will be included in a soon to be released division document on performance bonds. (Heise, Ziegenbein, Steensen)

PACIFIC WEST FIELD OFFICE

The Division Sends One of Its Own Into the Desert - Jim Wood has volunteered for a detail to Mojave National Preserve from June 26 through September 30, 1995. He will be assisting the park with minerals management issues. His major functions will be to help the park establish an on-the-ground presence with the mining operators and the many mining claimants. In addition, the many records transferred to the park from the Bureau of Land Management will be organized and incorporated into the park planning process. For those needing to contact Jim, he can be reached at (619) 225-3400, ext. 8843. (Higgins)