

## The Importance of Wildlife Habitat as a Post-Mining Land Use for State Wildlife Agencies

Surface mining reclamation offers wildlife managers the ultimate opportunity to practice habitat development for wildlife enhancement. More importantly it gives the designer of the reclamation plan an opportunity to have an impact on habitat development on large expanses of mostly privately owned property. Through better reclamation we would hope to increase wildlife utilization of mined areas and reduce impacts to aquatic resources while meeting regulatory criteria.

West Virginia has over 100 billion tons of recoverable bituminous coal with reserves found in 44 of the state's 55 counties. As early as the 1800's West Virginia was one of the nations top coal producing areas with the majority of the coal coming from deep mining activities. It wasn't until after World War II that strip mining using the contour method began to be utilized. As an extension of contour mining mountaintop removal or area mining gained popularity in the 80's. West Virginia annually accounts for about 16 % of the nation's coal production. Land use estimates in 2000 found that over 300,000 acres have been disturbed by some type of mining activity. A portion of this was pre-SMRCA and had no form of reclamation. Current WVDEP permit records indicate that since SMRCA was passed there has been over 300,000 acres of land permitted to be mined. The majority (over three quarters) of current permitted mining activity takes place a 14 county region of the state that lies in the Appalachian Plateau of south and southwestern West Virginia. This portion of the state is almost entirely in private ownership dominated by large land holding companies and is nearly 90% forested. The average size for current mining operations fall into the 400-700 acre range

with the larger mountaintop mines averaging just over 1,700 acres. Although leasing of these private lands has increased in recent years the majority of this area is considered open to public hunting.

There are numerous private land wildlife initiatives by both state and federal wildlife agencies. These programs are mostly aimed at private landowners, usually small farmers, and include some sort of monetary incentives. These programs are normally limited in scope and are restricted by budgetary restraints. Since the mining region is nearly 90 % forested and has very little agriculture these programs are not very active in this region.

With over 300,000 acres of land having been permitted in WV alone it is obvious to see the potential for wildlife habitat development during reclamation. This potential was realized by our agency after the passing of SMRCA in 1977 and resulted in the formation of our Mining Coordination Program in 1981. This program which will be described later in today's program was designed to promote wildlife habitat on reclaimed mined lands. To date we have designed wildlife revegetation plans for over 160,000 acres of mined lands. Unfortunately it is impossible to tell exactly how much of this has been implemented. Perhaps more unfortunately is the fact that recent influences have resulted in companies choosing wildlife less often as a post mining land use. The program began by averaging 12-13,000 acres a year but has fallen to averaging around 5,000 acres yearly. We feel that this has been the result of a lack of understanding rather than a genuine problem with wildlife reclamation. Past plans have been limited by regulatory and implementation constraints and the resulting plans have admittedly been

less than ideal but better than the open grassland alternatives that were often chosen in the 70's, 80's, and early 90's.

Our agency manages over 1.4 million acres in the state for public use but only a small % of this lies in the coal region and very little of it gives us the opportunity to impact wildlife habitat like reclamation on a mined site. Participation in hunting and fishing by the public is critical to any state agencies well being. With increased job pressures and increased travel cost it is imperative that we make quality hunting and fishing as easily available as possible to all the sporting public. The ability to improve open private land for wildlife becomes increasingly important when it comes to retaining our participants. The start from scratch opportunity that exists on a mine gives the biologist the ability to design reclamation plans that can be species specific and limited only by his /her imagination. The fact that this will be done on private land where we would other wise be unable to affect change on such a large scale is significant. Recent changes in reclamation practices have allowed us to improve wildlife plans. This improvement is only the first step: now we can only hope that meetings like this will once again bring wildlife habitat to the top of the reclamation list.