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FEATURED

Mining and sinkholes, oh my

By Greg Hitchcock | The Sidney Herald
Sep 15, 2023



The Northeast Montana Land and Mineral Owners Association Board of Directors
Greg Hitchcock



Special guest John Babcock, project manager for the abandoned mine land program at Montana's Department of Environmental Quality, spoke about his role of reclaiming old mines during a meeting of The Northeast Montana Land and Mineral Owners Association in Culbertson Tuesday.

"I identify mines for human and animal safety and environmental safety," Babcock said. "We look for abandoned mines through hand drawn maps, but no one really wrote anything down in the early days of mining."

An office of four staff, Babcock has been working as project manager for four months.

He said his job provides many opportunities for searching for unsafe sinkholes caused by time and weather conditions. All the abandoned mines his program is responsible for are pre-1977.

"(Holes) can be exacerbated by flooding problems, causing four feet holes where someone's grandkids could fall into," Babcock said. "With a wet spring, other holes may present themselves."

He said holes as large as 20 feet deep can be a real problem, relating how a fire department took out a fire near an abandoned mine when a firefighter sank into a hole protecting himself with his equipment.

Babcock said a hunter stumbling into the hole could have seriously hurt himself.

"We either put an anchor on top of it or a chain link fence around it, hoping they call us for backup and maintenance if needed," he said.

People are moving into Montana to live on top of abandoned mines, according to Babcock.

“We clean up old mines. Not many people know we exist. Not many people know about local mines,” Babcock said. “A sinkhole opened up near Anaconda. My dad used to call it the Little Josie Mine. It WAS the little josie mine.”

For more information on The Northeast Montana Land and Mineral Owners Association or to join, contact them at (406) 963-2246 or engel@nemont.net.