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Underground mine safety test center near Snowshoe gets green light

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The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has opted to move forward with plans to buy a 461-acre tract along U.S. 219 straddling the Randolph-Pocahontas county line, where it will relocate its Underground Safety Research Program for miner health and safety.

The property extends from the Randolph County community of Mace to a border with Snowshoe Mountain Resort's Silver Creek section in Pocahontas County. A segment of the tract also borders the Monongahela National Forest, and contains an inactive right-of-way for the state-owned West Virginia Central Railroad.

A Record of Decision announcing the move appeared in Wednesday's Federal Register.

The Underground Safety Research Program had been operated at the Lake Lynn Experimental Mine, a former limestone mine a short distance north of the West Virginia border in Fayette County, Pennsylvania, from 1988 to 2013, when its owner declined offers to renew a long-term lease or buy the land.

Lacking a site to continue research on such topics as coal dust combustion, mine ventilation, underground fire suppression and mine rescue techniques in a full-scale mine setting, the agency looked into the possibility of leasing time at experimental mines in Poland and South Africa. But the overseas sites lacked the dimensions needed to replicate U.S. mining conditions or the facilities needed to support research, according to the final environmental impact statement for the Mace site.

Use of the Defense Department's Large Blast Thermal Simulator at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico also was considered, but it was deemed inadequate in meeting the size requirements for methane and dust propagation experiments.

The agency eventually opted to pursue the possibility of developing a replacement for the Lake Lynn facility, and drew up a list of size, terrain and geological requirements a site would need, to qualify for consideration.

It was determined that a viable site had to include between 300 and 600 acres in a generally rectangular-shaped parcel containing an undisturbed rock mass at least 1,800 feet long, 600 feet wide and 18 feet thick, at least 100 feet beneath the surface. Sites containing either active or inactive oil or gas wells were eliminated from consideration.

The property specifications proved to be somewhat of a challenge to meet.

In June 2016, the General Services Administration, acting in behalf of NIOSH, issued a Request for Expressions of Interest for property owners within a 200-mile radius of the Lake Lynn facility. The one potentially qualified party who responded to the request turned out to own a tract that did meet the requirements.

Four months later, in a second attempt by the GSA to locate a seller with a tract meeting the requirements, the search was extended to include the 48 contiguous states. It drew three responses.

One, from a site in Kentucky, failed to meet minimum property criteria. Another, from Missouri, lacked some of the information needed to evaluate the property, and follow-up inquiries were not answered.

The only site determined to meet the federal government's property requirements was the West Virginia tract, owned by the Consortium for Silver Creek Group, a single-proprietor business with David L. Litsey of Snowshoe listed as owner, according to the Secretary of State's Office.

Representatives from NIOSH and its parent organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, hosted a public meeting at Linwood Community Library, in Slatyfork, in June 2018 to announce their plans for the new mine safety test center. The meeting also served as the starting point for gauging public support for the project.

A draft environmental impact statement for the project was released in February 2019, followed by a public comment period and, in March, a second public meeting, followed by the release of a final impact statement in July of this year.

During the environmental review process, plans for the replacement mine safety test site came into focus.

NIOSH intends to build a 164,000-square-foot underground test facility that would be carved out of a rock formation 500 feet beneath the surface, requiring the excavation of 152,000 tons of rock through boring, drilling and blasting. Two-thirds of that rock would be used on-site for fill.

The underground facility would be lined with reinforced concrete to provide blast-resistance during tests. After such tests, gas and dust would be vented out of the test chamber and later hauled to a landfill. Water would not be involved in cleaning residue from the underground testing, according to the agency.

An above-ground fire suppression test facility would include a filtering system, to remove particulate residue from tests involving combustion. All water and chemical solutions used in firefighting tests would drain into a sump, from which the water would later be recycled and reused on site, and solid residue would be periodically hauled to a landfill.

An estimated 17,000 to 25,000 square feet of above-ground buildings would be constructed to accommodate offices, classrooms and control and storage facilities.

Nearly 5 acres of old-field vegetation and 7 acres of forest would be cleared to accommodate development.

Water for the new test site be provided by an agency-paid-for 3.5-mile extension of an existing Pocahontas Public Service District water line.

The estimated build-out time for the development is four years, according to the Record of Decision filing, which clears the way for the General Services Administration to begin negotiating the purchase of the site from the Consortium for Silver Creek Group.

Once operational, the test site would be staffed by 12 full-time employees, working Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Two times a week, on average, an additional 25 staffers or visitors would be on site and, once or twice monthly, up to 50 people would be at the Mace center for meetings or training, according to the agency.

Among concerns raised by citizens during the environmental review process were potential risks involved in building an underground test site in karst terrain, where underground streams, caves and sinkholes are commonly found, and how a completed test center would affect traffic and tourism.

A local citizens group was formed to oppose locating the test site at Mace and was soon joined by Snowshoe Mountain Resort. In June, the Pocahontas County Commission voted to ask Gov. Jim Justice for alternative locations for the facility.