

# PA Environment Digest

## An Update On Environmental Issues In PA

Edited By: David E. Hess, Crisci Associates

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### **Feature: Mine Reclamation Groups Seek Allies In Natural Gas Industry**

By Susan Phillips, [StateImpact Pennsylvania](#)

Andy McAllister is a pragmatic man, who has been working for years to help clean up one of Pennsylvania's most tenacious environmental problems, acid mine drainage resulting from decades of coal mining. But he's also a risk taker.

In his spare time, the 50-year-old organizer for the [Western Pennsylvania Coalition for Abandoned Mine Reclamation](#), rides bulls on the rodeo circuit. His church community prays for him, and scratch their heads at his enthusiasm for getting back on a bull after breaking several ribs.

It's not what you think. McAllister says he's not macho, he rides bulls as part of his spiritual practice. He's one of those rare people comfortable with his mortality, and has an almost Buddhist approach to the rodeo life.

Now he's encouraging the gas industry to perform an environmental mitzvah. He wants Marcellus Shale drillers to help clean up the state's multi-billion dollar problem — 4,000 miles of dead rivers and streams unable to support any life.

"This is a good way of making lemonade out of lemons," says McAllister.

The culprit in acid mine drainage is fool's gold, or iron pyrite. Coal mining exposed large amounts of this mineral to air and water causing oxidation, the iron separates, and creates orange rivers and rust. The water that pools in the former coal mines becomes highly acidic, flows into rivers and streams, and kills aquatic life.

[The state is encouraging Marcellus Shale drillers to use this water to frack natural gas wells.](#) Some of the water would stay deep underground, but the produced water that returns to the surface, would have to be treated.

McAllister thinks this is a win-win. And he wants to take it further. He's working to get the gas industry to provide acid mine water clean-up funds in perpetuity.

"The gas industry is not used to working with the environmental movement," says McAllister.

He says he's been in contact with some drilling companies, but bringing them on board is a painstaking process. Still, he says it's more promising than trying to secure adequate state and federal funds.

Pennsylvania's Growing Greener grants have dried up. And each year, McAllister says he has to fight to keep federal lawmakers from balancing the budget by diverting mine reclamation dollars into the general fund. ([StateImpact Pennsylvania wrote about this last month.](#))

"This problem is so huge, even the state and feds can't fix it," says McAllister.

Acid mine drainage clean-up today lies primarily in the hands of volunteer watershed groups. McAllister thinks that in exchange for free water, gas companies could donate to these organizations.

"In order to continue using this resource, the gas company could assist the watershed groups to create a better treatment system," says McAllister. "The watershed group gets funding from the gas company for maintenance in perpetuity."

McAllister realizes this marriage of convenience may not go over well with fractivists worried about gas drillers doing their own share of environmental damage. And he knows the gas drillers are wary of environmentalists.

But he says he's not convinced that gas drilling will have as severe environmental consequences as some say. In the meantime, the damage done by the coal industry continues as a large, gaping wound. So, is McAllister having any luck with drillers so far?

"They're a business," says McAllister. "They want to see if it's worthwhile to them."

*(Reprinted from [StateImpact Pennsylvania.](#))*