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Management desperately needed in Sutton's 'coal hills'

By George Rauscher Apr 21, 2016

Beginning in the 1920s and subsiding in the 70s, the coalmines brought many jobs, money and people to the area of Sutton. The Jonesville Mine area was one of the biggest mining areas in the state back then. The folks that live there today still enjoy the community those coal mines started long ago.

Before 2009, the quaint little town of Sutton enjoyed the rugged-looking, unrefined and largely unknown 'coal hills,' as the community calls the old Jonesville mining area. The local kids rode dirt bikes, 4-wheelers and horses on the old narrow coal trails. Teens and families held occasional swimming parties in Slipper/Eska Lake during the summer and a few campers forded the undercarriage-abusing terrain to park near the lake or access our "Dedicated Airstrip" which ran parallel to Slipper Lake. Adults and kids alike with 4-wheelers and motorbikes found the challenge of hill climbing to be a draw. Wishbone Lake, Upper Coyote Lake and Eska Falls were areas where adventurous hikers spent the day enjoying fantastic views that those secluded attractions provided.

Early on, mining companies in the United States were not required to provide money for reclaiming the land they removed minerals from. The Mining Reclamation Act of 1977 provided federal dollars with the intent of restoring the land to a more natural state. In this case, those federal funds are distributed through the State of Alaska's Department of Natural Resources.

Those funds were used to put out the underground coal fires in 2006.

In 2009, those funds were used to redesign the airstrip next to Slipper Lake to allow parking for motor homes, campers and trailers. A series of large fire rings were installed around the manmade lake of coal tailings known as Slipper Lake. Roadways were rebuilt to afford easier access to the lake. Reclamation funds were again used in 2012 to stabilize and widen smaller trails for access to the upper, backside of the Jonesville mining area, to put out more fires and to create more sites for motor homes and camping.

No monies were spent on developing a management agreement to allow safe recreation amongst the many varieties of outdoor enthusiasts who would obviously be drawn to the area.

Since then, everything the quaint little town of Sutton enjoyed about the 'coal hills' has been progressively shattered. Understandably, safety aspects called for sealing abandoned mineshafts and putting out some smoldering deep burning coal fires, not for creating an unregulated playground where the activities resemble the happenings in some overseas war zones.

Today, some 300 motor homes and campers, 400 vehicles and trailers and up to 1,500 people can be gathered there on summer weekend in the 'coal hills'. Hundreds of ATVs without clear direction as to where the state land ends and private properties begin are trespassing and destroying those private properties daily.

Bullets from non-directional shooting are ending up in trees and porches of inhabited homes interspersed and adjacent former mining areas. Shooting across hiking trails and into the hiking areas is commonplace, as there is no shooting management to speak of. Explosions from cannons that now rock the town at all hours of the night and day keep homeowners who have invested their lives in this community constantly on edge, and some are now being forced to sell and relocate from friends and loved ones in the local area.

Exploding vehicles in your active state gravel pit provides revenue loss due to safety concerns years of pleading with DNR about these matters has gone unheeded. Trees are being cut down by gunfire. Littered shell casings lie in piles around bullet-perforated,

discarded and abandoned vehicles, which eventually get set ablaze. The vehicles adorn the grounds as monuments to a complete disregard for our community, which has been forced into hosting this Mad Max Theater for the State of Alaska.

Local campers now fear for the safety of their children, as ATV riders speed through family campsites in excess speeds of 60 MPH. Dust is unbearable at times.

Human fecal matter from thousands of people litters the area, as no toilet facilities accommodate these visitors during their stay. Porta-potties once provided by the Mat Su Borough in 2011 were dumped into Slipper Lake, polluting it, and were removed. Piles of syringes along with trailer loads of discarded trash now litter the area and local volunteers can't keep up during community cleanup week.

The community began calling our local legislators this past summer. State Senator Mike Dunleavy took a deep interest at my pleadings and took a 4-hour tour of the area with me. Upon his recommendations we began a process for community involvement.

The Sutton Community Council formed a Citizen's Action Committee. I have chaired that committee from its beginning last year. The committee was established for the purpose of securing a management plan and agreement which the State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources to abide by and enforce. The committee started a petition. We sent a representative to the capital during session. We have written letters to the governor and the DNR commissioner.

It has been a race against time as the much needed management plan may not happen before another person gets hurt by stray gunfire or someone is in the wrong place at the wrong time. The recent tragic shooting death of Anchorage resident Adam Malaby in the coal hills has been a cold reality that the problem we have repeatedly brought to the states' attention must be addressed by the DNR soon. It is a sad reminder of where our state priorities lie in all this.

The community of Sutton continues to request that the State of Alaska take responsibility and work with the community and the Mat-Su Borough. Now is the time for management of the reclaimed mining leases in the Jonesville/Slipper Lake area of Sutton. A lack of money is no excuse for the lack of attention this area has received.

George Rauscher is chair of the Jonesville/Slipper Lake Citizens Action Committee. This column is the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Mat-Su Valley Frontiersman or its parent company, Wick Communications.



Man shot and killed while photographing shooter