



## Repairing the Damage: Appalachia can reclaim dangerous environmental liabilities while creating thousands of jobs for the region.

After powering America for over a century, Appalachia is seeing devastating impacts from our global energy shift away from fossil fuels. In less than a decade, the Ohio Valley Region, including Kentucky, West Virginia, Ohio and Pennsylvania, has lost 25,000 coal mining jobs and nearly 13,000 oil and gas jobs. This staggering industry decline has not only hurt families, but had ripple effects across communities, forcing schools to close and a loss of essential services in places hardest hit.

Appalachian communities did not fuel our nation's prosperity without a cost – thousands of environmental hazards burden our land. With federal funding, Appalachian communities can reclaim and remediate abandoned coal mines, orphan wells, and coal ash ponds left behind at shuttered power plants. Such burdens deter development, hurt ecosystems, contribute to the climate crisis, and threaten the health and safety of nearby people.

These liabilities represent an American infrastructure crisis. However, two new studies by the Ohio River Valley Institute (ORVI) show that we can turn these liabilities into job-creating opportunities with investment at the scale of the problem.

### Reclaiming abandoned mine lands could create 17,000 jobs in Appalachia.

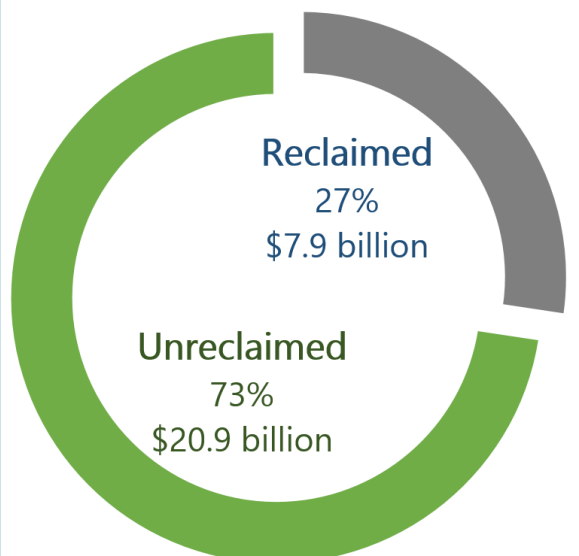


Image caption: Since 1977, 978,000 acres and \$7.9 billion worth of this damage has been cleaned up, but much more remains. Higher levels of investment are necessary. Source: [Repairing the Damage: Cleaning up the land, air, and water damaged by the coal industry before 1977](#) by the Ohio River Valley Institute

Millions of Americans live less than a mile from an unreclaimed coal site; these harmful legacies pose a continuing threat to the health, economy, and living environments for citizens of these communities. The longer that Congress allows thousands of acres of AML-damaged land and water to linger, the more these sites threaten coalfield communities, downstream residents, and the planet, and the more it will cost taxpayers. The need to repair abandoned mine lands is urgent. It will require drastic increases in the scale of funding, as well as ambitious changes to policy.

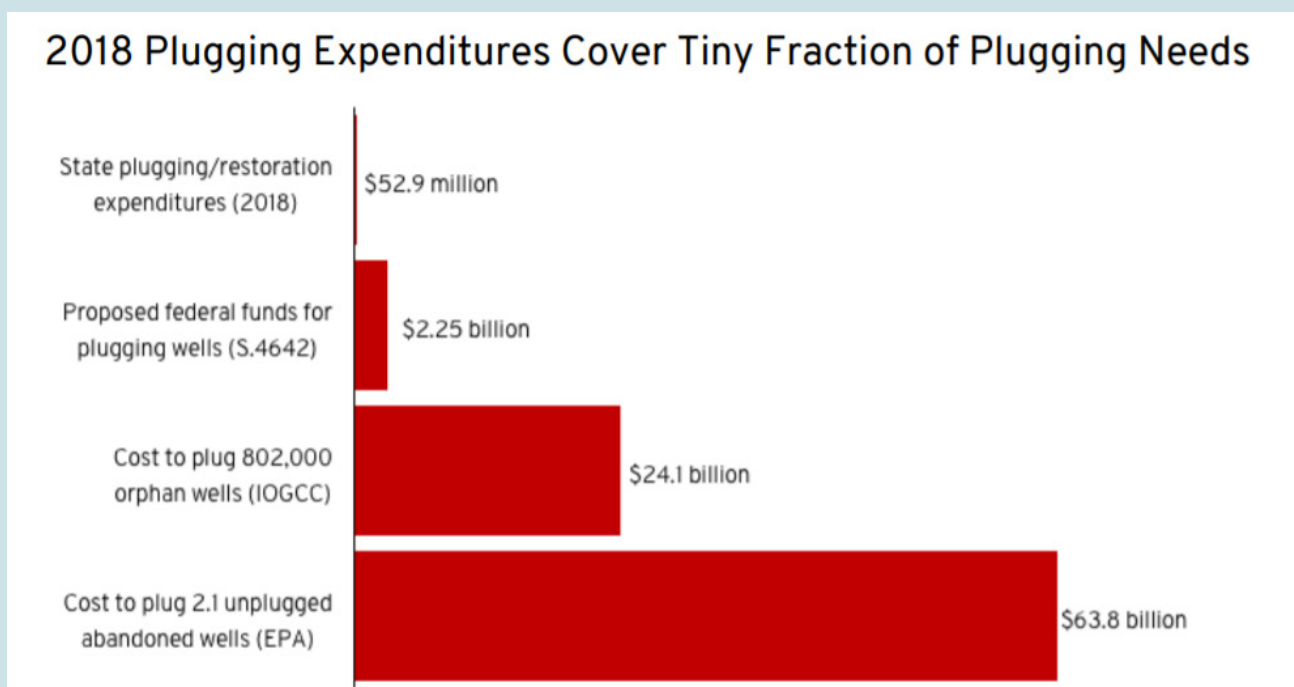
These investments should include a public reclamation jobs program under a Civilian Climate Corps (CCC) to ensure jobs are accessible among those most in need and in rural coal communities.

New estimates reveal an estimated \$26.3 billion in abandoned mine lands remain across the U.S. – this number is more than twice as high as the government’s current \$11 billion cost estimate. Appalachian states carry 84% of unreclaimed costs, with over 565,000 acres of abandoned mine lands burdening the region.

While essential policies such the RECLAIM Act and legislation to reauthorize the Abandoned Mine Lands (AML) fund are key, additional funds will be needed.

## Plugging and restoring orphaned and abandoned wells could create 15,000 jobs in the Ohio River Valley region.

Across the United States, millions of oil and gas wells are no longer in production, but have no party legally or financially responsible for plugging them. These “orphaned” or abandoned wells pose serious risks to public safety and our environment, leaking oil and gas into our water and soil and releasing climate-warming methane into the atmosphere. An estimated 538,000 abandoned wells remain in the Ohio River Valley, and plugging them could cost upwards of \$34 billion. However, this work could create a 72.3 million metric ton reduction in CO2 emissions.



:In 2018, only 2,372 orphan wells were plugged in the United States. At this pace it would take over about 895 years to plug the estimated 2.1 million unplugged abandoned and orphan wells, not including the nearly one million wells that are still in production today and others that may be drilled in the future. Source: Repairing the Damage from Hazardous Abandoned Oil & Gas Wells A Federal Plan to Grow Jobs in the Ohio River Valley and Beyond by the Ohio River Valley Institute.

Despite these dangers, policymakers are not acting. In the short-term, a minimum investment of \$5 billion is needed to plug and restore more abandoned wells, improve administration, identify more wells and improve well reclamation. Over the long run, a federal program is needed that can monitor and remediate these dangerous sites. This will require annual funding that far exceeds the allocations in current federal legislation.

The four states of the mid and upper Ohio River Valley region bear one-third of the nation's estimated 4 million abandoned wells – and one in five wells that are in production today. The region would not only disproportionately benefit from a large-scale well plugging program, but it would also greatly benefit from more local jobs and income.

## We must ensure genuine opportunities and maximize good union jobs.

There is an extraordinary opportunity to develop pathways to address these issues and, in the process, create over 30,000 jobs. Significant investments could raise the bar for wages and benefits, safety, and reclamation techniques in rural construction markets.

We must ensure that workers are paid a living wage, with policies to support collective bargaining rights. Policies should include hiring preferences and/or set-asides for former coal workers, oil and gas workers, local workers and people of color. Pathways, such as apprenticeships, should be available to open the door to these careers for women, people of color, formerly incarcerated workers, and those recovering from substance abuse.

At present, many reclamation contracts can be too small for union contractors to consider; aggregating multiple reclamation projects in a similar geographic area and bidding them as a larger single contract could increase the ability of unionized firms to realistically consider them. This approach is especially applicable in an environment where annual reclamation volume is increased drastically as proposed.

**The public investments we make today to stem climate change will pay off in the long run by protecting our health and the health of future generations. Solving the climate crisis is a reemployment plan for Appalachia and an investment in the region's future.**

