

2022 NASLR 50th Anniversary Conference - A Full Circle

By Dean Spindler

Fifty years is quite a milestone. Over the years I have managed to attend 37 conferences, including the 2020, and 2021 fully online virtual format. This year, one of the speakers included the implication in his presentation title that a particular quarry had come “Full Circle”. That term, “full circle”, got me thinking about some topics discussed at past NASLR conferences. I noted that this year several of the technical sessions and state updates talked about advanced knowledge learned from sites such as the Retsof salt mine subsidence, and the rapid expansion of bluestone mining. These topics were initially discussed years (decades!) ago at previous conferences. Those sites posed major challenges to the state agencies when they were first discussed because authority under the applicable state regulations was unclear at the time. Much needed to be learned in a short period of time. It also sounds like the concept of “cooperative professionalism” in the outreach efforts were used when the state reached out to the industry to come to a consensus of how to regulate these sites.

It was also timely that one of this year’s speakers talked about the need for more information for critical mineral locations. National critical mineral mining initiatives have occurred periodically and can pose some unique questions for regulatory and reclamation agencies. For example, in Illinois, there is first time interest in these minerals in some prelaw, environmentally hostile coal waste ponds. If coal is not also recovered, then presumably the activity of recovering critical minerals is not covered under the state coal regulatory program. If kept under the state’s 10-acre annual expansion standard, it would presumably also be exempt from the non-coal reclamation law as well. Water discharges would be regulated by the EPA, but it is possible that there may be no reclamation requirements under any law or agency. There will be a need for a rapid, steep learning curve for our sister water quality agency if this is pursued. Illinois has also had our first issue involving PFAS (perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances) potentially found in the foam used to suppress an underground mine fire. In addition, a forestry presentation was given about the Flight 93 site. A NASLR field trip during a past conference in Pennsylvania visited the site in the early days of the memorial development. This mine site was also dealing with an acid mine drainage issue which had to be incorporated into that project.

Keeping up on all the advancements in the use of GIS, GPS, and now drones will probably be on the agenda for many years to come as their uses are almost endless. After last year's conference I wrote about being rejuvenated from what I learned. This year was no exception. A few things I also noted included the excitement or passion for the topics by the speakers and their eagerness to share their information to help other programs. The other takeaways were for the speakers to build on the success of their past reclamation efforts and the candid discussion of the practical solutions to issues and developing technologies. I am looking forward to what next year brings to advance our reclamation profession.