

Corri A. Feige  
Commissioner

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Department of  
Natural Resources

Anchorage, Alaska

STATE OF ALASKA

PRESS RELEASE

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## **Usibelli Achieves Milestone in Poker Flats Coal Mine Reclamation**

**(Anchorage, AK)** – Before it began mining coal in the Poker Flats area near Healy nearly 40 years ago, Usibelli Coal Mine promised one day to restore the land to “equal or better than” pre-mining conditions, and backed its promise with bonding worth about \$2.5 million.

This year, Department of Natural Resources regulators determined that Usibelli has kept its promise by completing the last of a rigorous reclamation process, and DNR will release approximately \$411,000 of the remaining portion of Usibelli’s reclamation bond for the land that was reclaimed, Commissioner Corri Feige said today.

“In successfully achieving Phase III bond release, Usibelli has demonstrated the fundamental strength of our state’s mineral development system,” Feige said. “We can develop our land to produce resources to meet the state’s energy and economic needs, then restore the land to provide healthy habitat for people and wildlife, in perpetuity. This iconic Alaska company deserves congratulations on achieving this important milestone.”

Alaska coal mining laws and regulations establish a three-phase process for releasing reclamation bonds after mining operations cease. Companies can achieve Phase I bond release and get back 60 percent of their bond by backfilling and recontouring mined land back to its approximate original contour. Reestablishing a vegetative cover completes the Phase II requirements and triggers release of 20 percent of the bond.

After waiting 10 years for grass, shrubs, trees or other vegetation to become reestablished, the mine must hire an independent contractor to perform extensive inspections and recommend Phase III bond release to DNR, which must then verify the contractor’s work.

DNR conducted its own final inspections in June, drawing on data from satellite sensing, unmanned aerial vehicle surveys and on-the-ground observations to verify the

evaluation work by Alaska environmental services firm ABR, Inc. DNR released its inspection report on Friday.

Russ Kirkham, a senior DNR geologist and member of the agency's reclamation inspection team, said Usibelli has worked diligently with DNR and University of Alaska officials to design an effective approach revegetating the land and returning it to nature after producing more than 25 million tons of coal over its operating life.

"Usibelli Coal Mine has worked very hard and waited patiently to achieve this outcome," Kirkham said. "For this bond release, they met the requirements of very stringent state oversight for the permit, and the results of their work went beyond what was required."

Phase III bond release has been recommended for 367 acres at the Poker Flats site. Additional minor reclamation of the remaining mining acres, including removal of shops, offices, tipplers and roads, will be necessary before the rest of the land will be eligible for Phase III bond release.

"They did a real good job at reclaiming this land," said Kirkham. "Now DNR inspectors won't go into the area without carrying bear spray. There's lots of good browse and habitat that attracts moose, bears and other wildlife – pretty soon you'd be hard-pressed to tell there ever was mining here."

The Poker Flats area is only the second mining area in Alaska to achieve Phase III bond release. The first was the Gold Run Pass coal mine, another Usibelli operation.

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