

Safety at Old Mines: Stay Out – Stay Alive!

Every year someone is injured or killed on abandoned mine lands in the United States. Many abandoned mines in California date back to the Gold Rush and are an irresistible, and deadly, draw for children, teenagers, and adults.



Abandoned Mine Safety Frequently Asked Questions

1. What should I do in an emergency involving an abandoned mine?

Call 911 or contact your local sheriff's office. Rescue attempts should only be made by trained professionals.

To report an abandoned mine, email the Division of Mine Reclamation (DMR) at DMR@conservation.ca.gov or call the Abandoned Mine Lands Unit (AMLU) toll-free hotline at **877-OLD-MINE (877-653-6463)**. Please provide the mine location (e.g., latitude-longitude, name of nearest road, Assessor's Parcel Number) and a description of the mine. And remember to **Stay Out – Stay Alive!**

2. Are abandoned mines dangerous?

Yes! The [U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration \(MSHA\)](https://www.msha.gov/) and newspaper archives document stories of people who fell into mine shafts, drowned, or were otherwise hurt or killed in abandoned mines near their home or that they came across while hiking on public lands, riding off-highway vehicles, or walking their dogs. Homes above old mine workings and animals (pets, farm animals, wildlife) are also at risk. Many incidents put trained rescue personnel in danger. The data below are compiled from news stories and other records of deaths and near misses in legacy shafts, quarries, and other abandoned mine features in California (some records go back more than 125 years [e.g., in 1895, a man was rescued after he fell into a 135-foot-deep abandoned mine shaft in Angels Camp]). Ages of reported victims range from 2 to 75. As people may choose not to report an incident, the numbers of accidents and accident victims are likely lower than documented.

<u>Years</u>	<u>Fatalities</u>	<u>Injuries/Near Misses</u>	<u>Pets/Other Animals</u>
1950-1959	26	109	8
1960-1969	32	75	7
1970-1979	33	81	8
1980-1989	38	42	4
1990-1999	19	58	2
2000-2009	24	39	14
2010-2019	13	22	11
2020-2025	0	11	4

Abandoned mines hazards are not always apparent.

- Mines from the Gold Rush era were temporary by their nature. Miners added support inside mines as needed to compensate for the loss of structural integrity caused by removing rock; however, rotting timbers and unstable rock formations make cave-ins a danger even where abandoned mine openings look sturdy.

- Vertical shafts can be hundreds of feet deep. At the surface, they may be unprotected, hidden by vegetation, or covered by rotting boards.
- Other hazards at abandoned mine sites include the following.
 - o Darkness and debris can disorient visitors, leaving them lost underground.
 - o Internal workings such as winzes, drifts, and stopes present falling hazards.
 - o Unstable dynamite or blasting caps can detonate at any time.
 - o Rattlesnakes, mountain lions, bears, and other wildlife may use abandoned mines for shelter or habitat.
 - o Pockets of oxygen-depleted air or lethal gas (such as carbon monoxide) can cause asphyxiation.
 - o Dust particles at mine sites may cause diseases such as hantavirus or valley fever or other health problems due to naturally occurring elements such as asbestos, arsenic, or chromium.
- Mining-related environmental hazards can also affect watersheds. For example, a site may contain toxic waste generated during historic ore processing that can be washed downstream or become windborne. Water in a mine can react with sulfide-bearing rock to produce acid-generating conditions and leach heavy metals from rock. Bacteria can transform mercury into methylmercury, which bioaccumulates in the aquatic food chain; fish and seafood consumption is a major pathway by which humans are exposed to methylmercury.

3. What role does DMR have in making abandoned mine sites less hazardous?

DMR inventories abandoned mines statewide and partners with state, federal, and local landowning agencies to remediate hazardous abandoned mine features. Mine remediations make public lands safer for residents and recreationists by targeting hazardous sites near homes and high visitation areas such as trails, campgrounds, and off-highway vehicle parks.

Sources of funding to remediate abandoned mines include state fees collected on gold and silver mined in California and federal and other special funds. DMR projects, which are typically contracted to small businesses, include fences, backfills, polyurethane foam closures, and gates and other structures that allow access for bats that use abandoned mines for habitat or shelter while keeping humans safely out. DMR also promotes safety at abandoned mine sites by encouraging the public to **Stay Out – Stay Alive!**

4. What is Stay Out – Stay Alive?

Stay Out – Stay Alive is a national public awareness campaign, started by [MSHA](#), to warn children and adults about the dangers of exploring and playing on abandoned mine sites.



DMR staff conducting outreach on abandoned mines. Photo: DMR

Accident Summaries

Below are summaries of reports of a few fatal and non-fatal incidents at California abandoned mines in the past 15 years. This representative sample illustrates potential dangers of abandoned mines. Incidents often involve more than one person, and some fatalities occurred during attempted rescues. Remember: **Stay Out – Stay Alive!**

Representative sample of abandoned mine accidents in California from 2010-2025

(Source: DMR data obtained from media articles and partner agencies)

(F = Female, M = Male, n/a = not applicable, unk = unknown)

Date				
8/17/2010	Napa	A man drowned while swimming with friends in a fenced-off abandoned quarry pond.	1 M	27
10/30/2010	San Bernardino	A dirt bike rider was thrown clear when he rode into a shaft opening and his bike hit the opposite side of the shaft. He was transported by air to a nearby hospital with serious injuries.	1 M	unk
11/27/2010	Kern	A teen fell into a 30-foot-deep gas-filled shaft and fractured his spine.	1 M	17
1/29/2011	San Bernardino	A man fell 50-feet into a 100-foot-deep shaft after climbing over a fence, breaching a locked hatch, and climbing down a 40 year-old ladder that broke. He had head, rib, and knee injuries.	1 M	34
4/6/2011	Tuolumne	Two of four men SCUBA diving in a flooded abandoned quarry died, one who first returned to the surface with help and another who drowned.	2 M	34 37
4/11/2011	Riverside	A hiker reported a vehicle that was stuck 60-feet down a shaft.	unk	unk
4/9/2012	Kern	County firefighters rescued a man who had become entrapped in an open pit while mining for gold.	1 M	67
5/11/2012	Kern	A man and woman were rescued after falling into a 40-foot-deep shaft.	1 M 1 F	20s
6/6/2011	Amador	A mother contacted DMR after her son fell into an abandoned shaft on her property. He was playing in a shed built over the 20-foot-deep shaft when the floorboards broke.	1 M	unk
11/22/2011	Tuolumne	A volunteer firefighter checking a recently extinguished fire in a recreation area fell through brush hiding a shaft. He was rescued with ankle, hip, and back injuries.	1 M	unk

Date	County	Summary	#/Sex	Age
4/9/2012	Kern	County firefighters rescued a man who was trapped while mining at an abandoned mine.	1 M	67
8/24/2012	Los Angeles	A man and woman obtained serious injuries after their car fell about 150-feet into a rock quarry.	1 M 1 F	unk
11/20/2012	Alameda	A man looking for his cat fell into an old water-filled quarry surrounded by cliffs and drowned.	1 M	59
10/23/2013	San Bernardino	The County Fire Department rescued a lost dog found 25-feet down a shaft.	n/a	n/a
11/5/2013	Mariposa	One of two men exploring an abandoned mine was pinned when the shaft collapsed around him.	1 M	61
11/9/2013	San Bernardino	A man was exploring a multi-level mine with friends when he became trapped at a lower level. He was able to self-rescue through a ventilation shaft.	1 M	20s
2/25/2014	Placer	A teenager died after falling from a 250-foot highwall at an abandoned placer mine.	1 M	17
9/26/2014	Nevada	A man on his ATV fell about 30-feet into a shaft. He was rescued and treated for moderate injuries.	1 M	70
1/19/2015	Tuolumne	A U.C. Davis veterinary crew rescued a 1,200-pound cow from a 35-foot-deep shaft.	n/a	n/a
5/11/2015	Kern	A man and a woman were rescued after falling into a 40-foot-deep shaft.	1 M 1 F	20s
6/9/2015	Contra Costa	A man was hit by a falling boulder as he was working to stabilize an abandoned mine.	1 M	unk
9/29/2015	Placer	A County sheriff dive team recovered the body of a man from an old quarry.	1 M	26
10/9/2015	Riverside	Two men rescued a dog from a shaft.	n/a	n/a
10/25/2015	El Dorado	A man died when he fell from a 150-foot highwall at an abandoned placer mine.	1 M	19
12/31/2015	San Bernardino	County firefighters rescued a dog from a 35-foot-deep shaft.	n/a	n/a
1/1/2016	San Bernardino	The County Fire Department rescued a boy who fell down a shaft.	1 M	14
4/3/2016	Nevada	A County firefighter rescued a dog that fell into a 30-foot airshaft near the owner's home.	n/a	n/a

Date	County	Summary	#/Sex	Age
12/24/2016	Tuolumne	The San Dimas Mountain Rescue team recovered the body of a man from a shaft. Foul play was ruled out.	1 M	58
3/27/2017	Tuolumne	The County Sheriff Search and Rescue Team rescued a dog from a 40-foot-deep shaft located on a college campus.	n/a	n/a
2/19/2018	Tuolumne	A dog that disappeared 5 weeks before was found in an abandoned shaft 35-feet-deep.	n/a	n/a
5/24/2018	Amador	Firefighters rescued a horse from a flooded shaft.	n/a	n/a
6/6/2018	El Dorado	County firefighters rescued a lost dog, which was found in a 50-foot-deep shaft.	n/a	n/a
7/13/2018	San Bernardino	A dog was rescued from a shaft within an adit about 80-feet-down.	n/a	n/a
11/03/2018	San Bernardino	A man exploring with friends was injured after falling about 100-feet into a shaft. County Sheriff volunteers rescued him.	1 M	24
3/08/2020	San Bernardino	County Fire and search and rescue teams rescued a man 15 hours after he was stuck 900-feet below ground while exploring an abandoned mine.	1 M	unk
3/20/2020	Inyo	The San Bernardino Mine/Cave Rescue Team and rescuers from Inyo County and Nevada rescued a man who fell 80-feet down a 100-foot-deep shaft in Death Valley. The man suffered head injuries.	1 M	60
11/2020	San Bernardino	Two Park visitors nearly drove their Jeep into an abandoned shaft in Mojave National Preserve. There were no injuries.	unk	unk
1/12/2021	Riverside	A man suffered serious injuries when he fell 60-feet from the top of a quarry.	1 M	unk
1/17/2021	San Bernardino	An owner was out with his dog when the dog fell down a shaft. Rescue personnel were unable to retrieve the dog.	n/a	n/a
11/10/2021	Mono	A woman exploring with two others fell 70-feet down an internal shaft.	1 F	23
4/30/2023	Kern	County firefighters rescued a man exploring a shaft on his own rope system who became too tired to climb back to the surface 30-feet down.	1 M	64
8/8/2023	Kern	A man on a mountain bike fell with his bike into a shaft, breaking both wrists.	1 M	unk

Date	County	Summary	#/Sex	Age
10/19/2023	Kern	Three people were rescued from a shaft by County firefighters after one person fell 120-feet down a shaft. Two friends attempted a rescue and could not climb out. The person who initially fell sustained life-threatening injuries.	3 unk	unk
5/30/2024	El Dorado	A dog was rescued from a 60-foot-deep winze inside an open adit.	n/a	n/a
11/21/2024	El Dorado	County firefighters rescued a dog from a shaft after it fell 50-feet.	n/a	n/a
11/24/2024	San Bernardino	A couple stopped to rest while on a road trip and let their dog out for a walk. The dog saw a rabbit and gave chase before falling into a 40-foot-deep shaft.	n/a	n/a
2/9/2025	Placer	A male became stuck in a 50-foot winze inside of an adit after a household rope broke, and the victim fell 30-feet.	1 M	16
4/19/2025	San Bernardino	Two men became stranded after repelling down 250-feet into a shaft. Neither one was injured after being rescued.	2 M	unk
12/5/2025	Nevada	A man was rescued by County firefighters after falling down an abandoned shaft while searching for a lost dog.	1 M	unk