

Reading Article Post-G1

Article #2: Mountain Top Removal

The destructive process of mountaintop removal mining (MTR) has caused permanent damage to Appalachia. Although the law requires that mining companies restore the mountaintops after the mining has been completed, the 1.5 million acres of mountains that have already been removed cannot be re-grown, re-built, or replaced. The companies do secure the rock formations to prevent erosion and landslides, but their efforts cannot recreate the once beautiful mountain landscape. Furthermore, while companies are usually vigilant about securing the rock formations, they seem less interested in restoring the native vegetation. MTR operations clear enormous tracts of forest; some experts estimate that over 2000 square miles of forests in the Appalachian region will have been razed by mining companies by 2012. Instead of replanting the native trees and shrubs that have been cleared, many companies opt to plant cheap, fast-growing, non-native plants, such as *Lespedeza cuneata*, which is officially classified by the USDA as an invasive weed.

Environmental hazards are not only created in preparing a mountaintop for mining, they also continue once the coal has been extracted. After the blast, the excess mountaintop—which miners refer to as “overburden”—is usually dumped into nearby valleys or streams. The overburden contains a variety of toxic substances, including explosive residue, silica, and coal dust. These substances are filled with sulfur, lead, mercury, and other chemicals. Over 700 miles of streams in Appalachia have been contaminated by this dumping. Although the mining companies have built structures known as “sludge dams” that are intended to contain the toxic runoff, these dams can burst or leak, sending thousands of gallons of toxic chemicals into municipal drinking water.

While the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and other environmental protection bills can theoretically be enforced to protect Appalachia, local lawmakers have been reluctant to take action for fear of upsetting those who believe that the jobs created by MTR are vital to the community. However, instead of bringing jobs and prosperity to poor Appalachian communities, MTR companies actually bring destruction and poverty. MTR does not involve the amount of human labor required by traditional sub-surface mining. Despite the fact that coal production has increased between 1950 and 2004, the

human labor force working in these mines has drastically decreased. In the 1950's, there were approximately 130,000 people employed by the mining companies; by 2004, that number had dwindled to 16,000. Moreover, while the coal companies may make enormous profits from MTR, Appalachian communities located near the mines suffer increased rates of kidney cancer, brain cancer, lung cancer, chronic pulmonary disorders, hypertension, and vision problems. A variety of studies published in top medical journals link these health problems to the fact that the victims lived in close proximity to the mines.

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