

May 5, 2025

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Chairman
House Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20515

The Honorable Jared Huffman
Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources
1332 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20515

Dear Chairman Westerman and Ranking Member Huffman:

Our 54 organizations write on behalf of our millions of members and supporters in opposition to provisions in the House Committee on Natural Resources' budget reconciliation recommendations that seek to promote a massive expansion of destructive and polluting coal mining on public lands, give taxpayer handouts to coal mining companies, and legislatively mandate specific coal mining projects. These provisions – in combination with recent actions taken by President Trump – threaten to turn back the clock on the progress that has been made to end waste, fraud, abuse and mismanagement within the federal coal program, ensure a fair return to American taxpayers, and protect public lands, local communities and the global climate.

For centuries, coal mines and coal-fired power plants have disrupted our climate, polluted our air and water, and destroyed our public lands. Even though coal now produces less than one-fifth of all electricity generation in the United States,¹ it still accounts for more than half of all CO₂ emissions from the electric power sector.² Coal combustion emits more carbon dioxide per unit of energy than any other major fuel source and also leads other fuel sources in emissions of nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, heavy metals, and particulate matter.³ And yet, large areas of federal public lands are still being destroyed to source nearly half of all the coal mined in the United States. According to a recent release from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), there are currently 273 federal coal leases covering 405,000 acres of public land.⁴ In fiscal year 2023, the coal industry used those leases to extract more than 250 million tons of coal.⁵ Continuing to promote the use of our public lands for coal mining is inconsistent with the action that must be taken to prevent the worst impacts of climate change, improve public health, and protect our public lands. It is also inconsistent with basic economics. Coal has been in decline since its peak in 2011⁶, largely because of increases in generating capacity from other, cheaper energy sources.⁷ The real impact of policies to promote coal will not be to revive this dying industry, but to make federal coal

¹ U.S. Energy Information Administration. July 16, 2024. "Electricity explained: Electricity generation, capacity, and sales in the United States."

<https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/electricity/electricity-in-the-us-generation-capacity-and-sales.php>

² U.S. Energy Information Administration. April 17, 2024. "Coal explained: Coal and the environment."

<https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/coal/coal-and-the-environment.php>

³ Gasparotto, Juciano and Da Boit Martinello, Kátia. April 2021. "Coal as an energy source and its impacts on human health." <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666759220300500>

⁴ Bureau of Land Management. April 30, 2025. "First 100 days: BLM drives energy expansion and national strength." <https://www.blm.gov/blog/2025-04-30/first-100-days-blm-drives-energy-expansion-and-national-strength>

⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior. "Natural Resources Revenue Data: Production by year." <https://revenue.data.doi.gov/downloads/production/>

⁶ Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis. "Nowhere to go but down for U.S. coal capacity, generation." <https://ieefa.org/resources/nowhere-go-down-us-coal-capacity-generation>

⁷ Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research. "What is Killing the US Coal Industry?" <https://siepr.stanford.edu/publications/policy-brief/what-killing-us-coal-industry>

easier to lease by companies who will struggle to profitably and safely mine and reclaim mine sites, and to sharply reduce royalty revenue to federal, state and local governments. The era of coal will end. It's time to focus on supporting our communities through the transition away from coal, investing in workers, reclaiming our lands and waters, and addressing climate change.

Unfortunately, the provisions included in the committee's budget reconciliation recommendations seek to prop up the coal industry to the detriment of the American public, our climate, and the environment. First, the committee proposes an unprecedented expansion of coal leasing across federal lands. Sec. 80141 directs BLM to make at least four million acres of public land available for coal leasing no later than 90 days after the reconciliation bill is enacted. If all four million acres made available are leased, it would amount to a ten times increase in the amount of public lands that are currently being leased for coal mining. Furthermore, this section requires that BLM approve all pending and future applications for coal leases on public lands within 90 days of the date of enactment of the reconciliation bill or the date future applications are submitted, short-cutting crucial environmental analysis and public engagement. This would irresponsibly strip land managers of the discretion not to lease lands for coal mining if that would not be best use of a land or conflict with other uses such as recreation, cultural practices, or renewable energy development.

Another section seeks to give Big Coal a massive handout on the backs of taxpayers by reducing the royalty payments coal companies owe for the use of public lands for certain coal mining operations. Adequate royalty payments are essential to ensuring that the American public is fairly compensated for the value of publicly owned coal and the harmful externalities that mining coal creates. Mindful of those important policy goals, Congress established minimum royalty rates for coal strip mines of 12.5% while also allowing for mine-specific reductions on a case-by-case basis. Under that process, BLM has already drastically reduced royalty rates for many strip mines. For example, the average royalty for coal strip mines in the state of North Dakota was just 2.3% as of 2015.⁸ Between 1990 and 2015, royalty rate reductions for mines across the country cost American taxpayers an estimated \$294 million.⁹ The proposal to establish a 9-year *maximum* royalty rate of just 7 percent would dramatically exacerbate this shortfall, which would not only affect the federal budget, but also diminish an important funding stream for state and local governments that helps fund schools and colleges, highway and road construction, and city and town budgets. It is also likely to leave state and local governments ill-equipped to mitigate infrastructure impacts from mining. Further, it improperly subsidizes mining of high-cost or low-value coal that would otherwise be uncompetitive in the domestic energy market, particularly in light of low-cost, clean-energy alternatives.

Not satisfied with simply opening up millions of acres of public lands for new coal mining, the committee's recommendations also include two sections to greenlight coal mining on specific public lands. First, Sec. 80144 would authorize an 800 acre expansion of the Bull Mountains coal mine project in Montana by bypassing the normal environmental and public review process. This mine, its owners, and senior executives have an arms-length rap sheet of violating laws around worker safety, environmental protections, and criminal charges such as bribery, fraud, and corruption. The sordid saga is documented

⁸ Headwaters Economics, An Assessment of U.S. Federal Coal Royalties: Current Royalty Structure, Effective Royalty Rates, and Reform Options 13 (Jan. 2015),

<https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/Report-Coal-Royalty-Valuation.pdf>.

⁹ *Id.* at 14.

in a 2023 New York Times exposé.¹⁰ Mandating approvals for the mine’s expansion project would undermine federal environmental laws and an active court order requiring the Office of Surface Mining to conduct a thorough assessment of the climate and other impacts of the mine. It would also sacrifice community water supplies and deliver a slap in the face to locals who have struggled for years to compel federal regulators to tell the truth about the mine’s impacts to water resources. Second, Secs. 80302 and 80303 seek to re-open the Powder River Basin to new coal leasing after amendments to the Buffalo and Miles City Resource Management Plans (RMPs) last year ended that practice after a robust public process and scientific review. The Powder River Basin in Montana and Wyoming is the single largest source of coal in the United States, with approximately 43% of U.S. coal and more than 85% of federal coal coming from the Powder River Basin. While preventing new leasing, the 2024 RMP amendments allow continued mining on existing leases. BLM determined its decision was necessary to “reduc[e] long-term degradation and risks to public health or safety, and other consequences of greenhouse gas emissions.”¹¹ In addition, based on recent trends that “indicate[] an overall market decline with no new mines projected,” BLM determined that new coal leasing was unnecessary to meet market demand.¹² In light of these findings, it would be both irresponsible and unnecessary, by any measure, to re-open these lands in the Powder River Basin to new leasing.

Finally, Sec. 80142 would revoke a 2016 federal moratorium on new coal-leasing nation-wide, essentially codifying a Trump Executive Order and April 15, 2025 notice in the Federal Register.¹³ In enacting the moratorium in 2016, the Interior Secretary found that pausing leasing was necessary while the government evaluated measures to limit the leasing program’s significant contribution to climate change and other environmental externalities from mining and burning coal. The moratorium would also allow the government to redress the documented failure of the federal coal program to generate a fair return for American taxpayers. Nearly ten years later, the government has not enacted any reforms to the coal leasing program to address these ongoing (and growing) harms and the moratorium remains as important as ever.

We urge you to oppose these provisions for the sake of our public lands, climate, and communities.

Sincerely,
198 methods
350 Bay Area Action
350 Hawaii
350 Montana
Animals Are Sentient Beings, Inc
Boston Catholic Climate Movement
Center for Biological Diversity

¹⁰ Tabuchi, Hiroko. Jan 13, 2023. “A Faked Kidnapping and Cocaine: A Montana Mine’s Descent into Chaos.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/13/climate/signal-peak-mine-coal.html>

¹¹ BLM, Miles City Field Office, Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment, at 1-5 (Nov. 2024), https://eplanning.blm.gov/public_projects/2021155/200534253/20123920/251023900/2024_MCFO%20ROD_20241120_508.pdf.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ BLM. April 15, 2025. “Rescission and Termination of the Environmental Impact Statement Analyzing the Potential Environmental Effects From Maintaining Secretary Jewell's Coal Leasing Moratorium.” <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/04/15/2025-06388/rescission-and-termination-of-the-environmental-impact-statement-analyzing-the-potential>

Change the Chamber
Citizens Coal Council
Climate Equity Policy Center
Climate Hawks Vote
Climate Justice Alliance
Concerned Health Professionals of Pennsylvania
Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action
Earth Ethics, Inc.
Earthjustice Action
Eastern PA Coalition for Abandoned Mine Reclamation (EPCAMR)
Endangered Species Coalition
Friends of 2 Rivers, Inc.
Friends of the Earth
GreenLatinos
Greenpeace USA
Intheshadowofthewolf
Kettle Range Conservation Group
League of Conservation Voters
Malach Consulting
Milwaukee Riverkeeper
Montana Environmental Information Center
Montana Sierra Club
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
New York Progressive Action Network
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