

Coal River Mountain Action

Several people asked for more information about the 23 June civil disobedience near Coal River Mountain. We need Dickens to describe the local situation, but you can glean something from the first attachment (“June 23 Declaration”), a statement I was reading at the time we were arrested. Local pollution effects and regional environmental destruction should be enough to stop the practice of mountaintop removal. Vernon Haltom vernoncrmw@gmail.com, head of Coal River Mountain Watch, provided the details therein. Email contact for the office is coalriver@crmw.net. Website is www.crmw.net. They can make good use of any support.

The bigger picture, including climate change, makes it clear that mountaintop removal, providing only 7 percent of United States coal, makes no strategic sense whatever. Better leave the coal holding up the mountains. The second attachment has the remarks I made at the rally. There has to be some leadership from the top. We cannot continue to give President Obama a pass on this much longer. On the other hand, he needs broad support in order to do what is right.

As for the local people, we found them to be very friendly, and the state police were courteous and professional. Massey employees were out in force making as much noise as possible to try to drown out the speakers at the protest. If Gandhi had the sequence right (first they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win), we are already three-quarters of the way there. I noticed that it was only a handful of Massey people who were really vocal.

But that’s not to say that it isn’t a dangerous situation for the local people who oppose mountaintop removal – they are the courageous ones. Some barrel-chested noise-makers seemed pretty close to going over the edge. One of the Massey wives assaulted (sucker-punched) Julia Bonds, Goldman Prize winner for North America and co-director of Coal River Mountain Watch. I went up the mountain with Larry Gibson, who refuses to sell his property, which includes a 200-year-old cemetery containing scores of his relatives. He has been the target of drive-by shootings as recently as last week, and I saw two bullet holes in the side of his house. The FBI should be investigating. On the way down the mountain some thick-necked Massey employees gave us a vigorous one-finger salute – but others a friendly nod on passing. Larry mentioned that when Bobby Kennedy Jr. looked at the scalped mountain he said “if any foreign nation had done this to us, we would have declared war on them.” Instead what we have in Washington is (coal-fired) Senators who advocate for the abominable practice.

Don Blankenship, Massey CEO and seemingly a role model for a few of his employees, suggested he would like to “debate” me about global warming. I agreed to a discussion in which I could make a presentation (of order 40 minutes) of the science, he would have as much time (before or after), followed by discussion and interaction including audience. Mountain State University eagerly agreed to provide the auditorium. It seemed fool-proof, because if Blankenship failed to show, I could give a bit longer talk and have discussion with the audience. But, after I got a room in Beckley, staying an extra day, Blankenship decided he would only do a debate in a television studio with his favorite moderator. When Mountain State University learned what Blankenship wishes were, they withdrew permission to use their auditorium. I turned on the television news and heard: Blankenship offered to have a discussion with me, but “Dr. Hansen was still trying to check his schedule” – this was a television station that knew exactly what had actually happened. It seems that even the media is owned by coal.

When the strategic interest of the nation and the world is so clear, can a few gluttons with a few bucks really drive our policy? Does this great country not have better leadership than that?

Op-ed on mountaintop removal is at <http://e360.yale.edu/content/feature.msp?id=2168#comments>

June 23 Declaration

When, in the course of their lives, people find they are being abused by those in position of power, and their children and their children's future are being damaged by those in power, it is the right of the people, and their sacred duty, to resist those in position of power and fight for the well-being of the young and the unborn..

First, we believe that no child's health and safety are expendable for the expediency of a dirty energy source. Marsh Fork Elementary stands as the prime example of just how far this country has gone to support its addiction to coal, and just how far Massey Energy will go to support its profit margin. The West Virginia Supreme Court has joined Governor Manchin in turning their backs on these children, subjecting them to expanded operations within 300 feet of the school, in clear violation of the law's intent to protect the children. According to Massey's own documents, the second coal silo and associated operations will add over three tons of coal dust to the air the children breathe every school year during their most formative years.

Therefore, we demand that Massey withdraw plans to build the second silo within 300 feet of Marsh Fork.

Second, even without the second silo, the children's health is still at risk from the coal dust they already breathe. In addition, Massey subjects the children to the daily threat of a 2.8 billion gallon sludge dam only 400 yards upstream. Massey's 2,000-acre mountaintop removal site, with multiple violations, drains into the sludge dam and also subjects the children to dust.

Community members have for years demanded a safe, new school in the children's own community. The hard-working taxpayers of the community did not create this unhealthy situation—Massey did.

Therefore, we demand that Massey fund the building of a new school at a safe location in the children's own community.

Third, mountaintop removal destroys opportunities for sustainable economic development. On Coal River Mountain, Massey has applied for permits to remove over ten square miles of a ridge that has excellent commercial wind potential. This action would lower the mountain enough to remove this important economic opportunity. Wind energy here would also provide a source of electricity that does not put more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, thereby helping to prevent the worst effects of the global climate crisis.

Therefore, we demand that Massey withdraw its permits on Coal River Mountain in order to facilitate the Coal River Wind Project, which would provide a permanent source of clean energy and jobs.

Fourth, mountaintop removal destroys the life-giving water supplies that are essential to viable communities and sustainable livelihoods. As we have been again reminded in recent months, mountaintop removal subjects communities to greater risk of devastating floods. Instead of continuing to destroy mountains, Massey workers could be employed for decades minimizing the damage that has already been done. To begin this important task, Massey must not destroy one more acre of the mountains. Mountaintop removal exacerbates dependence on coal, which is largely responsible for fueling the global climate crisis. We must take immediate steps to transition away from coal as a source of electricity.

Therefore, we demand that Massey stop conducting mountaintop removal operations.

We hold it self evident that these demands are just, feasible, and essential. No job or profit margin justifies Massey's ongoing threats to the community by mountaintop removal.

Coal River Mountain
(Statement of Jim Hansen at 23 June 2009 rally)

Mountaintop removal ignites strong passions because local effects are obvious – pollution of air and water, effects on human health, destruction of the environment.

But another effect of coal mining, global climate change, will become important in the next few decades. Climate change will have large consequences for people who are alive today, especially children, and future generations.

President Obama speaks of “a planet in peril” for good reason. If we do not move rapidly to carbon-free energy, we will hand our children a planet that has passed climate tipping points. It will be a more desolate planet, with half or more species committed to extinction.

Burning all fossil fuels would destroy the future of young people and the unborn. Coal is the critical issue. Coal is the main cause of climate change. It is also the dirtiest fossil fuel. Air pollution, arsenic, and mercury from coal have devastating effects on human health and cause birth defects.

The science is clear. We must have a moratorium on new coal plants and phase out existing ones within the next 20 years. We should start with termination of mountaintop removal now. Coal from mountaintop removal provides only 7% of United States coal, less than the amount of coal that we export.

Why is the Administration not stopping mountaintop removal? Why do they advocate halfway measures? Because of the political clout of coal in Washington, that’s why.

But coal did not elect Obama. Who helped Obama win the Iowa primary? Not coal, it was young people. Who got out the vote in the general election – it was young people – young people who had hope – hope that we could have leaders who do the right thing, not what is politically expedient.

We must raise the pressure to do what is right – for our children and the planet – not for the wallets of the few. Continued mountaintop removal defeats the purpose of the administration’s effort to fight climate change.

And mountaintop removal poisons water supplies and pollutes the air. Coal ash piles are so toxic and unstable that Homeland Security has declared that the location of the nation’s 44 most hazardous coal ash sites must be kept secret. They fear terrorists will find ways to spill the toxic substances. But storms and heavy rain can do the same.

President Obama remains the best hope, perhaps the only hope, for real change. If the President used his influence, his eloquence, his bully pulpit, he could be the agent of real change. But he needs our help to overcome the political realities of compromise.

Politicians may choose to advocate for halfway measures. But it is our responsibility to make sure our representatives feel the full force of citizens who speak for what is right, not what some judge as “winnable”.

We must make clear to Congress, to EPA, to the Obama administration that we the people want mountaintop removal terminated and we want a move toward rapid phase-out of coal emissions. The time for half measures and caving in to polluting industries is over. It is time for citizens to demand – yes, we can.