



Opponents prepare for coal lease fight in Wyoming

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CASPER, Wyo. — Those opposed to a newly approved lease to mine coal in the Powder River Basin are readying their challenges to the decision.

A representative of the Powder River Basin Resource Council, a landowner group, said Monday that the group is preparing an appeal to the decision by the Bureau of Land Management that allows mining of an estimated 222.7 million tons of coal from land adjacent to the Black Thunder mine in southern Campbell County.

A spokesman for WildEarth Guardians, an environmental group, said the group is considering a similar move. WildEarth Guardians has appealed other leases approved in the past year and is opposing the BLM's leasing process for the basin in a suit still before federal court on appeal.

The Powder River Basin provides about 40 percent of the coal consumed in the United States, and the expansion of mining in the region has attracted growing interest from environmental groups. The BLM said early this year that it had received 14,000 comments from the public on one set of tracts, a much higher number than usual.

That increased attention, mounting opposition and the lengthy and sometimes-uncertain federal regulatory process has frustrated the coal industry, and industry representatives have expressed exasperation about the roadblocks and delays.

"It's important to the nation that these mines continue to operate and these coal plants continue to produce electricity," Marion Loomis, executive director of the Wyoming Mining Association, told The Associated Press last year. "I think that's something to keep in mind when people are just trying to delay action and drive up costs."

Jeremy Nichols of WildEarth Guardians said the basin is seeing increased outside attention because of the numbers involved — billions of tons of coal that produces significant pollution.

"This is an amazing opportunity to focus on a small area that has tremendous impact on our energy future," Nichols said. "We're asking BLM to take a leadership role, and so far they seem completely unwilling to do it."

Several coal leases for thousands of acres and hundreds of millions of tons of Powder River Basin coal are now moving through the federal approval process and a few are nearly approved. Many of the lease applications were submitted between 2004 and 2006.

In 2010 the BLM approved leasing of land adjoining existing mines in the Powder River Basin: Peabody Energy's Caballo, Cloud Peak Energy's Antelope and Alpha Coal West's Belle Ayr. The additional tracts add up to 5,532 acres of mining land estimated to hold 758.4 million tons of coal.

L.J. Turner, a member of the Powder River Basin Resource Council, ranches southeast of Wright on the south end of the Powder River Basin and runs cattle on some of the federal land included in the newly approved lease.

He said he's watched grazing acreage disappear over the years as coal mining expands in the basin, and he's grown increasingly concerned about the effects of mining on surface water.

Turner opposed previous leases and will oppose the newly approved lease. But he's not sure it'll do any good.

"I think a lot of the time the decisions has already been made and they're just going through the process to justify it," he said. "I've been here all my life, and I'm not going anywhere else. I'd like to have it for the kids so it's there — so they can do some of the things I've had to do."

It's expected St. Louis-based Arch Coal, which owns the Black Thunder mine, will purchase the 2,000-acre lease. Arch applied for the lease in 2005.

For Nichols, of WildEarth Guardians, the approval of a lease signifies it's time to take a stand.

“Once these leases are issued, the companies have the right to mine coal,” he said. “So, this is the go, no-go time. So, we’re going to do what we can.”