

Trump administration halts study on health impact of surface mining

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The Trump administration has issued an order to cease all work on a study relating to the potential health hazards for people living near areas of surface coal mining in Central Appalachia. The Department of the Interior's Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement ordered the halt on August 18, stating in a letter that it was reviewing all of its grant disbursements in excess of \$100,000.

The study was requested by the state of West Virginia's Department of Environmental Protection and Bureau for Public Health in 2014. Undertaken over the last two years by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine through a \$1 million grant from the Department of Interior, the study was investigating mountaintop removal operations in West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee.

Mountaintop removal is a process of surface mining, in which land at the top of a mountain is blasted off to expose a coal seam considered too small to extract using an underground mine. The removed land, called overburden, is used to fill nearby valleys. Mountaintop removal requires a fraction of the labor force used in underground mining, and is therefore seen as more economical for mine companies. Central Appalachia has at least 500 mountaintop removal sites.

Previous studies into mountaintop removal and public health in Central Appalachia have linked mining pollutants to increased mortality rates, birth defects, some forms of cancer, and other diseases.

Mountaintop removal has been linked to increased risk of flooding due to valley waterways being used as dumping grounds for overburden. A study from 2014 published by *Journal of Exposure Science and Environmental Epidemiology* linked potentially dangerous air pollution levels in areas near surface coalmines. Slurry ponds, formed during the coal

cleaning process, contaminate ground water with heavy metals, mercury, and arsenic, as well as other toxins, from seepage during heavy rains.

A 2014 study from West Virginia University published in the journal *Environmental Science and Technology* concluded, "A growing body of evidence links living in proximity to MTM [mountaintop mining] activities to greater risk of serious health consequences, including significantly higher reports of cancer." The finding "strengthens previous epidemiological studies linking MTM to increased incidence of lung cancer, and supports adoption of prevention strategies and exposure control," the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* reported October 16, 2014. At the time, the newspaper reported, the study was the first of its kind to directly link the human health data collected in the region to environmental data.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine study was supposed to address these issues. The study was halfway through its two-year process, and the money for the research had already been allocated. Department of Interior spokeswoman Heather Swift told the journal *Nature*, "The Trump administration is dedicated to responsibly using taxpayer dollars in a way that advances the department's mission and fulfills the roles mandated by Congress."

The mining industry has dismissed evidence linking diseases and pollution and continually seeks to suppress and discredit peer-reviewed research into the subject. The National Mining Association issued a statement regarding several previous studies, citing counter-analyses declaring that the studies "may be unnecessary" given the collapse in coal production in the region and that such research "often failed to account for extraneous health and lifestyle effects."

In blaming cancers and premature deaths on “lifestyle” choices of residents, the coal industry is in lockstep with politicians at the local, state and federal levels who evade responsibility for the collapse of living conditions in the region and justify further cuts to social programs in the name of “personal responsibility.”

The study’s funding is paltry by federal standards, when one considers that *every hour*, the nearly 16-year war in Afghanistan costs an estimated \$4 million. The gutting of research funding is purely political, of a piece with a concerted attack on industrial and business regulations and workplace safety.

The Trump administration has already rolled back the Stream Protection Rule, aimed at protecting waterways from coal pollution, and lifted the moratorium issuing new coal leases on federal land. Both were token measures issued by the Obama administration late in its term. Trump’s proposed 2018 budget includes a \$1.6 billion funding cut to the Office of Surface Mining, including the axing of 4,000 staff. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke told a Senate hearing, “This is what a balanced budget looks like.”

The ruling class declares that workers must choose between jobs and a safe and healthy environment. This is a false choice. In the coalfields region of Appalachia, Trump campaigned as a friend of coal and promised to bring back coal jobs in economically decimated mining areas. However, each measure lifting “job-killing” environmental regulations has only benefited coal bosses, with no improvement in the lives of working class residents. In an area stricken with poverty, opioid abuse and suicide, a study on the detrimental health effects associated with surface mining is considered an inconvenience for profit-making, and therefore must be halted.



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