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Mountaintop mining doesn't harm streams

BILL DOES NO GOOD, BUT LOT OF HARM

By J. Steven Gardner

First, I have a confession: I am an environmentalist. As a professional engineer specializing in environmental issues for 32 years, I have some knowledge and expertise.

Many recent articles, editorials and commentaries about surface mining characterize mining as an outlaw industry but are filled with mistakes and misconceptions not based on science or facts.

Mountaintop mining, the focal point of much recent vitriol, is a legal method of removing rock and dirt at the tops of mountains to expose coal seams. Much of the material is returned to the mountaintop to create gently rolling plateaus.

Excess material is placed in engineered fills -- many on old, unreclaimed mines -- with new drains or reconstructed streams. This practice is no different than heavy construction for building highways, housing, universities or other developments.

More streams are rerouted for agriculture or to build the places where you shop, work or live in Louisville, Lexington or Northern Kentucky than are affected by mining. Water does not disappear; new stream channels are formed, using scientific stream restoration techniques.

Why do we do this? Surely it would be better to leave our natural environments undisturbed. Greed is often given as the principal reason. If that is the case, everyone reading this shares the guilt. We owe our standard of living and human longevity to the nation's coal resources.

Nuclear power is the only option to replace coal short term. Alternatives will be developed, but in decades, not overnight. Coal and other natural resources will always have to be mined for raw materials. Unless we regress to living in caves and using stone tools, this is another "inconvenient truth."

Another fallacy is that mining companies are bulldozing communities or forcing people from their homes. Nothing is further from the truth. Most landowners and communities want the valuable land created by mining for future expansion.

Many people oppose expansion, but that is a reality of our society. Pikeville, Prestonsburg and Hazard are examples of how surface mining benefits communities, and it is promoted by those cities and their residents.

It is interesting that many vocal opponents of mining live outside the coalfields and that many of the sponsors of the so-called Stream Saver bill live in Louisville or Central Kentucky.

It is interesting that the drafters of the bill did not consult experts in mining and reclamation from the University of Kentucky's biosystems, agriculture, mining and civil engineering, agronomy and forestry departments -- people who have decades of research experience developing new, innovative methods, solving many past problems. It also appears that drafters sought no input from regulators.

This bill is not based on science and creates a financial liability for Kentucky by the potential taking of individual property rights. It does not just target coal companies, but many individual land owners. Many criticisms the bill is supposed to remedy have already been addressed. It is not just about streams or mountaintop mining; it dramatically impacts all mining -- underground and surface in Eastern and Western Kentucky.

The bill's supporters say there will be no impact since we can just mine underground. It was interesting that a large part of supporting testimony was about slurry impoundments. This bill virtually eliminates slurry impoundments, which are necessary for underground mines.

This is a classic case of untruths being repeated so often that they are accepted as fact. Pictures showing mountaintop mining generally depict operations totally disturbed. Typical photos of reclamation are almost never shown. Using best available practices, mining can be conducted in an environmentally sustainable manner, restoring land to its pre-mining condition or better.

Reclaimed mine sites are some of the most valuable property in Eastern Kentucky. Data show that our environment is actually improving.