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ONE VIEW: MINING FACTS AND MYTHS

By J. Steven Gardner

Bill Carman's commentary on Dec. 27 tells the facts of surface mining reclamation. Richard Dawahare's commentary contains exaggerations and misstatements. I am a native Appalachian, having lived and worked in the mountains much of my career. I believe my University of Kentucky education in biosystems, agricultural, and mining engineering and environmental systems, plus 33 years experience working on practical solutions to environmental problems gives me knowledge of the subject.

Myth: Mining explodes tops off mountains with toxic explosives, creates moonscapes, smothers streams.

Fact: Mining uses ammonia nitrate explosives, the same as fertilizer on farms and lawns. Best engineering practices are used to design fills with stream mitigation and reconstruction.

Myth: Sludge, waste from cleaning coal is another pollutant.

Fact: Opponents often say they are not against coal mining, just mountaintop removal and slurry impoundments. That is a contradiction. Some coal from MTM operations may be washed, generating refuse. Virtually all underground-mined coal is cleaned. Proposed legislation would adversely impact underground mining in Appalachia.

Myth: Reclaiming mountains always involves planting non-native grasses.

Fact: This is what was required in the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 (SMCRA). Government, industry and academia mistakenly thought that compacted grassland was the way to go. New reclamation techniques developed largely by UK researchers show properly reclaimed land grows trees faster than natural ground.

Myth: Two percent of mountaintop sites are used (for development).

Facts: Not all sites have been developed but hundreds have been and there is potential for more. Opponents don't consider alternative uses like wildlife habitats, agriculture and managed forests to be developed.

Fact: Owners must grant permission for their land to be surface mined. Owners convert many former mine sites to alternative uses after permits are released by regulators. Some of the most valuable land in East Kentucky is reclaimed mine sites.

Myth: Change perverted the Clean Water Act, redefining coal waste as permissible fill for valleys.

Facts: Waste as used here is an engineering term for excess rock and dirt from earth-moving operations. Fills have always been allowed legally. The recent Stream Buffer Zone rule was a clarification of policy since SMCRA. Roads and urban development have filled and rerouted thousands of miles of streams with a greater environmental impact than mining.

Myth: Mining destroys land forever.

Fact: Thousands of people now live, work and play on reclaimed mine sites. Mining creates opportunities for the future, new sculpted landscapes that are true examples of sustainable development. Studies have shown that only 6.8 percent of the Appalachian region where coal can be mined by mountaintop methods will potentially be affected.

Fact: Our way of life is made possible by coal. Great strides have been made in improving our environment in spite of increased energy demand. Alternatives must be found for the future but for now coal is the only alternative to maintain our lifestyles. New legislative initiatives being proposed will greatly increase the costs of providing energy, impacting the poor, elderly and disenfranchised.

J. Steven Gardner is President/CEO of Engineering Consulting Services, Inc., Lexington.