



Wednesday, Jan 13, 2010

Posted on Sat, Dec. 12, 2009

Report details surface mining in E. Ky.

Shows mining damage to streams, critics say

By Bill Estep

bestep@herald-leader.com

Coal companies got approval to fill hundreds of hollows in Eastern Kentucky during the last decade, according to a new federal report.

Such fills, called hollow or valley fills, are controversial because they often bury stream areas.

Regulators gave coal companies permission to put up to 2.15 billion cubic yards of spoil — rock and dirt left over from mining operations — into 1,488 fills in Eastern Kentucky between 2000 and mid-2008, the U.S. Government Accountability Office said in a report issued this week.

Nearly all those were hollow fills, which are smaller and located higher in the watershed than valley fills, one official explained in the report.

The report also covered West Virginia, where coal companies got approval to build nearly 500 fills to dispose of 2.7 billion cubic yards of spoil.

Coal companies do not build all the fills for which they get permits. The report did not count how many of the fills companies actually created.

Opponents of surface mining said the report offers further evidence that mining has caused widespread environmental damage in the two states.

"I think it adds weight to the argument that the scope of the surface mining that has taken place and is taking place is truly massive," said Ed Hopkins, director of the Sierra Club's environmental quality program. "That is a huge amount of rock and dirt."

Tierra Curry, a Knott County native who is now a scientist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said there have been conservative estimates that 2,000 stream miles in Appalachia have been buried under hollow fills and valley fills. Mining also removes mature forests from large areas, she said.

"It is time to say enough is enough and end surface coal mining in Appalachia," Curry said.

Luke Popovich, spokesman for the National Mining Association, said opponents of mining are trying to twist the report to fit their view when, in fact, the report made no conclusions and was not an indictment of the industry.

The coal industry provides the most affordable fuel for generating electricity in the United States and does so in an environmentally responsible way, operating under a raft of rules, Popovich said.

The GAO is the investigative arm of Congress. Among the other findings in its report:

- The number of acres associated with permits issued from January 1990 through July 2008 grew from 378,800 to 778,800.
- The number of acres covered by open permits in Eastern Kentucky in that period grew about 2.2 percent a year. A permit is open until companies finish reclaiming a mined area and get back the bond they posted to cover reclamation, or forfeit the bond, the report said.
- The acreage in permits that are still open became concentrated in fewer counties since 1990. In mid-2008, 44 percent of the acreage included in open permits was in Pike, Perry and Knott counties. In 1990, the three Eastern Kentucky counties with the most acreage in open permits — Pike, Martin and Breathitt — accounted for only 28 percent of the total, the report said.
- The length of time that permits remained open in Eastern Kentucky from 1990 to 2008 averaged about 7½ years.

Curry said one significance of the report is that it is the first cumulative calculation of how much land area has been affected by surface mining and is in a form people can easily access.

Unlike many GAO reports, the one on surface mining did not offer recommendations.

However, it is certain to be used in the ongoing debate over surface mining.

One of the members of Congress who requested the study was Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Washington, who chairs the budget subcommittee that handles funding for environmental programs and the oversight of surface mining.

Dicks flew over mined areas in Eastern Kentucky in July 2008 with U.S. Rep. Ben Chandler, who had asked him to come, and later seemed surprised at the extent of the mining.

Dicks said lawmakers might need to take steps to restrict mountaintop mining.

A staffer in his office said Friday that information from the GAO report will be used at a hearing sometime next year.