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Verizon Wireless Criticized by Green Groups for Backing Event

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Verizon says it all started innocently enough. A Verizon Wireless sales team in West Virginia agreed to co-sponsor a Labor Day event called "Friends of America" featuring singer Hank Williams Jr., Ted Nugent and several country music groups. For \$1,000, Verizon got to set up a sales table at the event, which is expected to draw 75,000 people to Holden, W.Va.

The sales staff "jumped at the chance," said Verizon Wireless spokesman Jim Gerace.

But now environmental groups and bloggers are besieging the phone company because they say the Labor Day bash was designed to bash the climate legislation that Congress is considering.

The Labor Day event, labeled a "rally" on its [Web site](#), also features Fox News conservative host Sean Hannity and Don L. Blankenship, chief executive of coal giant [Massey Energy](#), who says in a short video on the site that "We're going to have Hank Williams and a very good time, but we're also going to learn how environmental extremists and corporate America are both trying to destroy your job."

About two-thirds of the way down the event's Web home page -- after the karaoke competition promotion, detailed directions, and photos of the country music stars and Hannity -- the site invites people to "click here" to sign a petition opposing the Waxman-Markey climate bill adopted by the House in June.

News of Verizon's role was carried a week ago in a Huffington Post item written by Jeff Biggers, grandson of a miner, historian of Appalachia and author of a forthcoming book on the "secret legacy" of the coal industry.

Biggers said Friday that he learned of the rally from a flier he received at least a couple of weeks earlier. Upon scanning the list of sponsors -- which includes more than 100 firms, most of them local -- he stopped short at Verizon's name because its image is very different from lead sponsor Massey's. (In its "green press kit," Verizon says that "environmental stewardship is ingrained in Verizon's heritage.") So Biggers blogged and e-mailed his posting to the company.

But Verizon said it didn't intend to make a political statement initially, and that it didn't want to make one now by withdrawing its sponsorship and shunning the event.

That did little to calm environmentalists, who took up the cause, urging Verizon to yank its sponsorship or face a consumer boycott.

"Verizon Wireless made a bad connection by teaming up with Massey Energy, one of the worst polluters in America," Tierra Curry, a biologist with the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity, said in a press release Wednesday. "If they're serious about 'going green,' they need to admit they made a mistake and hang up on this Big Coal party." By Friday, the group said an online protest letter had 80,000 supporters.

Rob Perks, campaign director of the Natural Resources Defense Council, warned the company in his blog that it faced a "backlash." Perks, who did not attempt to contact Verizon, pasted a familiar photo of the actor from Verizon's television ads over the background of a mountaintop marred by coal mining. The smiling actor holds a phone to his ear. In the next frame, with dirt flying up behind him, he is saying "can't hear you . . . blowing up a mountain."

Credo Mobile, a wireless phone company -- and a Verizon competitor -- that donates a small portion of its revenue to nonprofit groups "working for progressive change," has posted a petition on its "action" Web page urging Verizon to "get out of bed with anti-environment extremists." (Credo, which packages services using the Sprint network, was started by Working Assets.)

Verizon, which owns 55 percent of Verizon Wireless, has dealt with other promotion controversies. The black coalition ColorOfChange.org claimed that it convinced Verizon and other companies to drop ads from Fox's Glenn Beck program after Beck said in late July that President Obama was a racist with a "deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture." Now bloggers are asking why Verizon can't similarly drop its rally sponsorship.

"Nobody knows what pullout means," said Gerace. "All the damage is done. All the publicity for the event went out with our name on it . . . There's nothing else to do." He added that "we also can't allow the blogosphere to run our business."

Moreover, Gerace said, bloggers got the Glenn Beck story wrong. "We never pulled ads," he said. "We had a commitment to Fox for a number of ads. They placed them. We satisfied that commitment, and the last time any ad of ours ran in that time slot was Aug. 11 -- about a week before bloggers attacked."

Verizon executives also said they are reluctant to tell legions of local managers that they lack the authority to take initiatives. Verizon says that the West Virginia sales team saw this as a music event and marketing opportunity; after all, the throngs that show up Monday won't come because of the Waxman-Markey bill or speakers such as Lord Monckton, 3rd Viscount of Brenchley, who served as an adviser to former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and asserts that human activity is not causing climate change.

Even Biggers conceded that much. "Lord Monckton not a household name in the hollers," he said. "The Lord is, but not that lord."

