

There would be more regulation of coal mining if it didn't just affect 'hillbillies'

Jeff Biggers, The Guardian 4/21/15 Tuesday 21 April 2015

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/21/there-would-more-regulation-coal-mining-if-didnt-just-affect-hillbillies>

Dust produced by mountaintop removal mining sites are a known cancer risk, but little has been done to protect inhabitants of Appalachia

For many in central Appalachia, the fight against reckless strip mining operations recalls a popular t-shirt in West Virginia: “Save the Endangered Hillbilly.” It’s not really a joke; decades of contempt and disregard for rural mountaineers underscore an existence no less threatened than local wildlife.

Appalachia has become a code word for our nation’s sacrifice zones. “Coal mining has been destroying human and wildlife communities in Appalachia for more than 100 years”, [according to](#) Tierra Curry, a southeastern Kentucky native and a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity. The Center’s lawsuit against the US Fish and Wildlife Service in 2012 resulted in a recent proposal to list two species of fish impacted by mining under the Endangered Species Act.

The region has been forever mired by depictions of hillbilly poverty and depravity and no amount of Big Coal-bankrolled politicians spinning a misplaced nostalgia about once thriving but now vanished coal mining towns can undo that. Appalachia always ranks at the bottom of federal attention until a regulatory crisis erupts into a man-made disaster - such as the violation-ridden [Upper Big Branch coal mine explosion](#) or last year’s [coal chemical disaster on the Elk River](#). And then the federal attention, like the media swarms, is fleeting.

This disregard for the inhabitants of the region is a big reason why – despite a mounting health and humanitarian crisis – there has still not been federal

intervention to put an end to the public health disaster wreaked by mountaintop removal mining.

A West Virginia University [study](#) last fall conclusively demonstrated that “dust collected from residential areas near mountaintop removal mining sites” – where the radical strip mining process involves clear-cutting massive swaths of forests, blasting off the tops of mountains and dumping the pulverized remains and heavy metals into valleys and waterways – “causes cancerous changes to human lung cells”.

The breakthrough study, which deserved national attention and government action, added to over two dozen peer-reviewed [analyses](#) that have pointed to soaring rates of birth defects, cancer, heart and respiratory diseases in mountaintop removal areas. And that’s not even to mention the large-scale, forced depopulation of once-thriving mountain communities like Twilight and Lindytown, West Virginia, or my own strip-mined historic community of [Eagle Creek](#), in the hills of southern Illinois.

The Obama administration, which hasn’t sent a single top-level official to visit a mountaintop removal site, has done little to end regulatory delays and indifference to this deadly public health crisis.

Mountaintop removal’s cancer link has remained completely off the radar for national public health, cancer and pregnancy groups. And even mainstream environmental and climate change organizations are more focused on other battles over disastrous fracking, tar sands or divestment.

This is not only a tragedy, but a lost opportunity. Instead of viewing Appalachia as a regional sacrifice zone of hillbillies with little political power, a national campaign to ban mountaintop removal on the basis of such documented public health concerns could be a game-changing legal precedent for all extraction battles, including fracking, tar sands, uranium and oil drilling.

While [President Obama](#) and former Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#) love to invoke the “children in the hills of Appalachia” in their speeches, national

environmental and public health groups should press the president and all presidential candidates to support the Appalachian Community Health Emergency Act, which requires an immediate moratorium on mountaintop removal operations until a federal health study can determine its impact.

Curry, the long-time advocate from Kentucky, said it best: “For decades coal companies have gotten away with polluting Appalachia’s water and killing its species, but it is time for the Endangered Species Act to start being enforced in Appalachia.” And, while we’re at it, it’s time Washington included endangered Appalachians, as well.