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Family Farm and Ranch Groups Call for Coal Mine Cleanup on Anniversary

August 3 is 40th Anniversary of Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977

BILLINGS, Mont. – As the nation marks the 40th anniversary of the federal strip mine law, coal field residents are urging the federal government to make good on promises to reclaim mined land.

Today marks 40 years since the signing of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA), which governs coal mining and reclamation operations nationwide. The landmark legislation protects the water, land, and air of coal communities. It was won by a coalition of coal mine neighbors from across the country, including ranchers, farmers, and water users from across the Powder River Basin of Wyoming and Montana.

Signed by President Jimmy Carter on August 3, 1977, SMCRA established the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement to oversee active coal mining in the United States; reclamation of coal mines after mining is completed; and reclamation of coal mines abandoned prior to the law's passage. Work on the law spanned the 1970s, with several unsuccessful bills introduced into Congress.

“I was one of a number of westerners who joined people from Appalachia lobbying for years to pass SMCRA. We wanted to prevent in the West the kind of damage that was occurring in the East. The old spoils at Colstrip were a sign of what could happen if we failed. We wanted our rangeland reclaimed and functioning. SMCRA has not been perfectly enforced, but the land is so much better off than it would have been without it,” said Northern Plains Resource Council's Ellen Pfister, a rancher near Shepherd, Mont. **“We saw this law as essential to protecting our way of life, livelihoods, and the productive future of the state of Montana.”**

SMCRA requires robust reclamation of mined lands during continued mining operations. Mine operators must successfully revegetate mined land and replace damaged surface water and groundwater resources, under the supervision of state regulators. Reclamation bonds ensure funds are available for the state to reclaim the land if operators abandon their mines without cleaning up. Opportunity for public comments and involvement is central to the entire process, from mine permitting to release of reclamation bonds, which occurs as reclamation work is determined to be successful.

Federal data reveal that, since 1977, 609 square miles of land have been strip-mined throughout the West. However, only 97 square miles (16%) have been fully reclaimed and released from reclamation bond, and 348 square miles (57%) have been revegetated. [1]

“Revegetation is somewhat an established process, but the reclamation of the water resource after removal of the coal is the broken part of the egg that remains a mystery to fix,” said Pfister. **“Federal figures show that much reclamation remains unfinished, with more land yet to be disturbed, but the state of water in revegetated land remains the largest**

question. SMCRA’s protections are more relevant for western coal communities now than ever.”

Coal production peaked in 2008 in the Powder River Basin and across the country. Coal’s role as a baseload fuel for electricity is being eroded by cheaper natural gas and renewable energy, including wind and solar. The coal industry has recently emerged from a wave of financial collapse and layoffs, with bankruptcy filings in 2015 and 2016 by the country’s three largest companies, Peabody Energy, Arch Coal, and Alpha Natural Resources.

“The coal industry is in continuing decline as its markets slowly shrink,” said Bob LeResche of Clearmont, Wyo., Chair of the Powder River Basin Resource Council. **“We must have full reclamation at every mine as the industry contracts. This will extend jobs in the industry and restore mined land and water resources for use after strip-mining is gone.”**

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[1] Excerpts of relevant federal data available online at <http://bit.ly/2hrgB1C>

Powder River Basin Resource Council is a grassroots organization of landowners, citizens and affiliate groups dedicated to good stewardship of Wyoming’s natural resources.

Northern Plains Resource Council organizes Montanans to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life.

The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) is a regional network of eight grassroots community organizations with 12,200 members and 40 local chapters and affiliates in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wyoming.