

For Immediate Release:

October 29, 2020

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Remaining Western coal mine reclamation could create thousands of jobs for rural communities

Updated report finds job creation dependent on funding from exiting mining companies

BILLINGS, Mont. – The collapse of the coal industry is devastating small communities across the Western United States, but reclaiming tens of thousands of acres of mined lands could quickly create between 6,000 and 12,000 full-time equivalent jobs over a two- to three-year period, according to updated findings released today by the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC). For comparison, according to preliminary 2019 data, surface mines in the West employed 8,540 workers in 2019.

The report, [Coal Mine Cleanup Works](#), estimates potential reclamation job creation for seven Western coal states, and provides recommendations for decision makers to ensure cleanup is fully funded and employs local workforces.

Here is a breakdown of the full-time reclamation “job-years” that could be created in each of the seven states analyzed in the report:

- Colorado: 259
- Montana: 1,150
- Arizona (Navajo Nation / Hopi Tribe): 416
- New Mexico (Navajo Nation): 1,301
- North Dakota: 830
- Utah: 65
- Wyoming: 5,100

These findings offer a rare bright light of opportunity for the coal communities facing massive lay-offs and lost revenue as the coal industry continues to decline. Reclamation is one of the few immediately available job opportunities for local workers after a mine shuts down, and the report finds that these jobs are ideally suited for current or former miners.

“About [350 miners](#) lost their jobs at Kayenta Mine last year when Navajo Generating Station shut down. This report shows up to 200 of them could be back working full time on efforts to reclaim that land over the next few years,” **said Nicole Horseherder, director of the Navajo community advocacy organization Tó Nizhóní Ání.** “But they’re not because Peabody Energy is trying to push off its reclamation obligations for two to four more years. Navajo and

Hopi workers who have been out of jobs for more than a year could be working to restore our lands and waters, but since the mine closed last August, Peabody is just leaving big open pits sitting on our land, and people are still out of jobs at a time when we need it most.”

Ben Nuvamsa, who served as chairman of the Hopi Tribe for two years, said “Peabody’s negligence in moving forward with reclamation is just the latest example of how coal has harmed our people. Coal mining affected the lives and health of the Hopi. It depleted the water supplies we depend on, scarred our land and destroyed important cultural and spiritual resources.

“Holding Peabody Energy and the federal Office of Surface Mining accountable for reclamation and putting Hopi people to work cleaning up the mine is a first step to righting many decades of exploitation,” he continued. “Jobs are hard to come by on our remote reservation, so jobs created to reclaim our land would be welcomed by our people.”

[Coal Mine Cleanup Works](#) points out that reclamation jobs cannot replace all the jobs and revenue that coal mines provide, but it is one piece of a forward-looking approach to adapt to a changing energy economy.

“Just last summer, Blackjewel shut down their two mines in Campbell County (Wyoming) – Belle Ayr and Eagle Butte – and overnight hundreds of people are out of a job. We in Wyoming are living with that threat over our heads,” **said Stacy Page, a Powder River Basin Resource Council member and former Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality regulator.** “At any time, these mines could just shut down and what will people do? A few years of extra cleanup work for a few hundred people is significant for our rural coal communities. It gives people time to plan and prepare for the next step.”

“I ranched above the Signal Peak Mine, and the threat of water loss and damaged land was an unrelenting burden to my ranching operation and will be the same to other operators in the Signal Peak mine plan. We need to ensure the land and aquifer here are properly cleaned up, so that this area can be safely used by ranchers and others once the mine closes shop,” **said Ellen Pfister, a Northern Plains Resource Council member and retired Bull Mountain rancher.** “The market is winding down the coal industry, and these workers are going to need jobs to support their families. We can provide good-paying jobs to these skilled workers while restoring the land to productive use. If we work together, we can seize this opportunity to build a more resilient future for coal workers, ranchers, and rural communities across the West.”

“Reclamation jobs were really important for me and my community after the New Horizon Mine shut down,” said Roger Carver, a retired coal miner and former president of UMW Local Union 1281, and member of the [Western Colorado Alliance](#). “We at the union had to fight for these jobs because we knew workers were in limbo and didn’t know when the next paycheck was going to be. Plus, it felt good to be part of the cleanup and to repair the land that is part of my home.”

This report builds on [previous research by WORC](#) that found that more than a third of all land strip mined for coal in the Western U.S. awaits cleanup, and the threat of underfunded cleanup looms large. Although reclamation is required by law, a weakening coal industry may try to evade or delay its reclamation obligations, and existing policy loopholes only exacerbate the problem. [Coal Mine Cleanup Works](#) finds that delayed and under-funded reclamation are the biggest hurdles to getting laid-off miners back on the job doing cleanup work.

The report recommends several actions to minimize the risks of underfunded and delayed mine cleanup, and maximize the potential of hiring the impacted local workforce:

1. State and federal decision makers should end insufficient and insecure reclamation bonds.
2. Regulators must ensure that all cleanup liabilities are assumed by new mine owners and that new mine owners are poised to fulfill those obligations.
3. State regulators need to be ready to seize bonds immediately when a mining company abandons its mines in order to initiate reclamation immediately.
4. Federal and state authorities should work to accelerate the pace of contemporaneous reclamation at active mines.
5. Federal, state, and local policymakers should institute policies that facilitate and incentivize local hiring for mine reclamation.

Coal Mine Cleanup Works is available on WORC's website at:

<https://www.worc.org/publication/reclamation-jobs-report/>

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The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) is a network of eight grassroots organizations in seven Western states with 15,000 members, many of them ranchers and farmers committed to common-sense reform in agriculture, oil and gas development, coal mine reclamation, and rural economic development. Headquartered in Billings, Mont., WORC also has offices in Colorado and Washington, D.C.

The Powder River Basin Resource Council, founded in 1973, is a family agriculture and conservation organization in Wyoming. Resource Council members are family farmers and ranchers and concerned citizens who are committed to conservation of our unique land, mineral, water, and clean air resources.

Northern Plains is a grassroots conservation and family agriculture group that organizes Montanans to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life.

Western Colorado Alliance for Community Action brings people together to build grassroots power through community organizing and leadership development. We work together to create healthy, just and self-reliant communities across Western Colorado.

