

The Honorable Gale Norton
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

October 10, 2002

Dear Secretary Norton,

On August 7th, 2002, seventy environmental, conservation, taxpayer and community groups gave a letter to Tom Fulton, Chair of the Interior Department's task force on bonding, requesting that the task force meet with relevant local and regional stakeholders before making any recommendations on the critical issue of financial provisions for environmental cleanups. We have received no reply to our request, nor has the taskforce contacted any of our organizations to set up consultations. We were extremely disappointed that the task force would choose not to fill our good-faith request to take part in your "four C's initiative of consultation, cooperation and communication in the name of conservation." Given that fact, we ask that you reconsider our original request to have additional meetings with affected citizens, communities and public interest groups. If the task force does not hold such meetings, we urge you to return any recommendations from the task force with instructions to engage in a more complete consultative process. Anything less would be a direct violation of the "four C's" process.

The issue that the task force is considering -- bonding of hardrock, coal, oil and gas operations -- does not just affect the surety industry and the extractive industries. Rather, the most serious effects of the issue are on the local communities who are often left with a legacy of pollution when a mine or oil site is inadequately bonded or when a company goes bankrupt or otherwise fails to live up to its cleanup obligations. Pollution problems from hardrock and coal mines and oil and gas wells range from scarred landscapes to waters polluted with toxic chemicals to acidic runoff that kills fish and lasts for generations. These industries' poor track record of cleanup -- at the expense of taxpayers, the environment and the health of nearby communities -- warrants the fullest possible consultation with public interest groups that have worked on and lived with those issues.

The issue of ensuring that mining and oil and gas extraction industries pay for environmental cleanups is too critical and will affect too many citizens around the country for the task force to arbitrarily limit input from environmental, taxpayer and community groups. A single meeting with public interest groups far into the process is not sufficient to represent the intricate local and regional issues involved in creating adequate financial assurances for these three very different industries. Absent informed public involvement, any recommendations that the task force produces will be meaningless.

Because of regional variances and differences in governing legislation, to be credible, the task force should hold meetings with interested environmental and community groups

working on coal, oil and gas, and hard rock minerals. These meetings should be held in different regions of the country to accommodate local concerns. The task force should hold these meetings at a time and in a manner that facilitates the participation of citizens and citizen groups, and other interested parties. We urge you to direct the task force to hold as many meetings as necessary to give public interest groups the opportunity to fully inform the task force and ensure that the process has achieved at least a balance of input between industry and public interest groups.

In order for the Interior Department task force on bonding to correctly do its job, and to achieve a balanced approach to this critical issue, it must meet with all stakeholders involved. In light of your expressed desire to engage in a consultation process with all those affected by your department's decisions, we urge you to stop the current one-sided process, and to direct the task force to reconsider our original request to consult with affected communities, local groups, and representatives from the environmental and taxpayer communities and incorporate their views into the task force's recommendations. Otherwise, we urge you to ignore the task force's recommendations until a more complete consultation occurs and is reflected in those recommendations. This process would be the only way to ensure compliance with the "four C's" initiative. Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

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cc: Rebecca Watson, Kathleen Clarke, Tom Fulton, R. M. "Johnnie" Burton, Jeffrey Jarrett