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Department of Interior Criticized for Ignoring Public Concern

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BILLINGS – A Western citizens' group has criticized the Department of Interior Task Force for engaging mining, oil and gas companies in a one-sided dialogue over bonding requirements, and considering weakening the regulations that protect taxpayers from being forced to pay to clean up contaminated sites. The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) along with 50 public interest groups submitted a letter to Interior Secretary Gale Norton on Friday, urging her to intervene and direct her Bonding Task Force to address public concerns.

"The Bonding Task Force is revealing Secretary Norton's 'four C's' for the smokescreen they are," said Richard Parks, sporting good shop owner and WORC board member, of Norton's much-touted guiding principles of "consultation, cooperation and communication, in the service of conservation." "The four C's are worse than just empty rhetoric, they're a deliberate attempt to divert the public from Interior's pro-industry bias."

Secretary Norton appointed the Bonding Task Force at the request of industry groups in April, and has held a series of meetings with industry representatives. Environmental and community groups requested meetings with the Task Force, but received no reply until Rep. Ron Kind (D-WI) reprimanded the Task Force for not addressing public concerns at a hearing in July. As a result, the Task Force held a single meeting in Washington D.C. Seventy environmental and community groups whose members would bear the brunt of weakened regulations have asked for additional meetings but the Task Force has ignored that request.

"We're extremely disappointed," said Parks. "Local communities are impacted the most when mines or oil and gas wells aren't cleaned up. Citizens in these communities have experience, knowledge and insights that would benefit the Task Force, but the Task Force does not appear to be interested in our input or a balanced process."

Mining, oil and gas companies are proposing to lower bond amounts and allow corporate guarantees, which are little more than paper promises that sites will be cleaned up and offer little or no protection in the event a company files for bankruptcy.

The Bureau of Land Management finalized new rules for hard rock mining in 2000 that will help ensure appropriate bonds, if they are not undercut by allowing corporate guarantees. Federal oil and gas bond amounts remain shockingly low, however. For example, the Gunnison Energy Corporation in Delta County, Colorado has posted a

\$25,000 bond to cover 400-500 coalbed methane wells - that's only \$50-65 per well. The Bureau of Land Management has estimated it costs between \$2,415 and \$75,000 to clean up a single well.

"We believe that mining and oil and gas companies can clean up their operations and still make a profit," said Nancy Sorenson, a Wyoming rancher and member of WORC's Wyoming group, the Powder River Basin Resource Council. "A dependable financial assurance program gives them the incentive to do so, and protects taxpayers, landowners and local communities. This means that bond amounts need to be raised, not lowered."

The Task Force is expected to release its recommendations to Secretary Norton later this fall.