

from the January 03, 2006 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0103/p02s01-ussc.html>

In coal country, heat rises over latest method of mining

Monday's explosion has focused attention on mine safety, but environmentalists worry about long-term effects of 'mountaintop removal.'

By [Amanda Paulson](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

BOB WHITE, W.VA. - When Maria Gunnoe looks over her 40-acre farm in southern West Virginia, she finds it hard to believe it's the same place that, growing up, she considered her "own little private heaven."

Seven floods in five years have washed out most of her yard, filled her barn with debris, and destroyed parts of her bridge. The stream where she used to swim and catch bait is now a pollution discharge system. The well water is now so toxic that bathing in it has caused problems.

"It's hard to absorb everything that's happened in the last seven years," Ms. Gunnoe says, looking at a photo of the farm in happier days, before the fruit trees fell victim to pollution and flooding and the surrounding horizon was forever altered.

In Gunnoe's opinion, there's one culprit: mountaintop removal mining.

It's a method of extracting coal that has become more common among the steep slopes of southern West Virginia and parts of Kentucky. It's the most efficient way to get the coal - an important energy source - and an economic boon for a struggling state, proponents say. But the practice, which involves blowing off the top of a mountain to reach the rich coal seams beneath, exacts a toll on the environment and the quality of life that some here, like Gunnoe, are increasingly unwilling to pay.

Here in Boone County, one of the poorest areas of one of the poorest states, residents are bringing lawsuits and launching local campaigns to save their piece of Appalachia. "The worst thing I can do at this point is sit back and keep my mouth shut," says Gunnoe, now an organizer for the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition.

Mountaintop mining began in the 1970s, on a tiny scale. It increased significantly in the past decade, now accounting for about 95 percent of surface mining in southern

West Virginia and between one-quarter and one-third of all coal mining in Appalachia.

"There are about 28-1/2 billion tons of coal in this area," says Bradford Frisby, associate general counsel for the National Mining Association, an industry group. "Mountaintop mining is definitely the most efficient means of removing the coal, and in a lot of these areas it's really the only way you can mine these particular coal seams."

But critics say it devastates the environment, particularly the forest ecosystems and the many streams buried under soil and debris blasted from the mountaintops. By conservative estimates, more than 1,200 miles of streams have been affected and 350 square miles of mountain land destroyed.

This fall, four federal agencies - the Environmental Protection Agency, the US Army Corps of Engineers, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the US Office of Surface Mining - issued a long-delayed Environmental Impact Statement on the practice. The study, originally intended to minimize harm from mountaintop mining, shifted in 2001 when then-deputy Interior Secretary Steven Griles redirected it to focus on "centralizing and streamlining coal mine permitting" - which the final EIS does. The change infuriated environmentalists, who claim the government is weakening environmental regulations to help the mining industry.

"A lot of what has renewed the growth of mountaintop removal mining in the last four years has to be attributed to Bush administration policies that have removed any obstacle, including local citizens, standing in between industry and the mountains," says Joan Mulhern, legislative counsel at EarthJustice, an environmental law group. She cites a 2002 rule change that designates rubble from the blast as fill rather than as waste, and a plan to ease a restriction on mining within 100 feet of a stream.

The mining industry, for its part, says the mines operate with the strongest environmental regulations in the world. Moreover, coal is an increasingly important source of energy within US borders, says Luke Popovich, spokesman for the National Mining Association.

"You have to look at what you're disturbing versus what you're offering your country," he says. Coal technology is cleaner than ever, he adds, and with oil prices high, many are looking to coal to meet America's energy needs.

Mr. Popovich and Mr. Frisby point to the many mining jobs in West Virginia, as well as to indirect jobs like trucking and manufacturing. "These are the kinds of jobs that can hold a community together year after year and sustain it through ups and downs,"

says Popovich.

To some, costs outweigh benefits

Among the forces aligning against mountaintop mining, few would qualify as tree-huggers. Like Gunnoe, they're longtime West Virginians, usually connected in some way to coal mining, who speak in Appalachian twang of "hollers" and "cricks" - and are furious over what they see happening to the mountains and their communities.

"I'm bitterly opposed to mountaintop removal, because it takes jobs away from coal miners," says Jim Foster, a Bob White resident who has retired from a union job in an underground mine, who volunteered for the local fire department for decades, and who brags - justifiably - about his homemade venison jerky and fudge.

Mountaintop mines rely more on machinery than muscle than do traditional underground mines, and they hire fewer workers, he says. Where West Virginia once had 120,000 mining jobs, it now has 15,000.

Mr. Foster's immediate concern, though, is his home. The dishes in the cabinet shake with every blast, and he's been warned that when mining begins on the mountain across from him rocks might hit his roof or windows.

He's determined not to leave, but Luke and Dara McCarty, another retired mining couple who live one town over in Cazy, say they'd get out if they could. The nearby mining has so depressed the value of their property, though, that they don't see any options.

"Every hollow used to be a booming little community," says Mrs. McCarty. "It's a devastated area now. But we can't afford to go anywhere else.... They use our poverty against us. They say they're bringing jobs in, but they're just destroying everything we have."

The promise of reclamation

The mining industry acknowledges its activities may be hard on some communities, but it is proud of reclamation work that follows the mining operations. Ads - and textbooks in Gunnoe's son's classroom - state that the industry leaves the landscape in better shape than it found it.

"Level land is a rare commodity in the steep slopes of southern West Virginia," says Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association. Creating such land is a

boon for local communities, he says.

Popovich cites successful developments - like a major golf course - built on some mountaintop mining sites. In other instances, he says, the landscape is restored.

Scientists counter that sensitive forest ecosystems are impossible to replace, particularly when the headwaters of streams are buried and the steep slopes removed. "They're living in this world of denial," says Ben Stout, an ecologist at Wheeling Jesuit University, of the reclamation claims. Gunnoe calls the efforts "putting lipstick on a corpse."

One of the oldest mountaintop mining sites in Boone County, the former Wind River mine that was reclaimed 15 years ago, is today a terraced hill covered in grass and shrubs, but no trees. A dry ditch of rocks was built where the stream once ran, to help with runoff, though many residents below say they live in fear of flooding.

As Gunnoe drives her red pick-up along the highway, she points out other areas of concern: a school where nearly all the children are reported to have respiratory problems, a place along the road where a mining company injects wastewater into abandoned mine shafts, and which sometimes erupts and causes landslides.

Gunnoe is a mother of two and worked as a waitress before she became an organizer. Part Cherokee, she's the fifth generation of her family to live in this valley. Her grandfather and father worked in the underground coal mines, and two brothers still do.

"I've been accused of being antimining, but I'm not," she says. She has, though, become a fervent advocate of renewable energy - she'd like to see the flat tops of former mining sites used for solar and wind power.

"If they want to call me an environmentalist, that's fine," Gunnoe says, referring to what's often a derogatory label in these parts. "But they need to realize the issues I'm talking about are human issues. Anybody who enjoys clean water and clean air is an environmentalist.... I don't fight just to save a mountain, I fight to save the people at the bottom of the mountain."

[Full HTML version of this story which may include photos, graphics, and related links](#)