

# **Keeping Clean Air Safe From Coal Mines**

## *Groups File Petition Seeking Controls for Methane, Other Harmful Pollutants*

### **Gassy Coal Mines**

- Underground, surface, and abandoned coal mines release a number of pollutants known to endanger public health and welfare, including methane, nitrogen oxides, particulate matter, and volatile organic compounds.
- Methane is a safety hazard and a potent greenhouse gas with more than 20 times the heat-trapping capability of carbon dioxide. Methane concentrations have increased 150% since 1750 and is more abundant in the atmosphere than at any time in the last 400,000 years.<sup>1</sup>
- Coal mines are the second largest source of anthropogenic methane emissions in the United States, releasing nearly 160 billion cubic feet annually, or more than 67 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent.<sup>2</sup>
- In the Powder River Basin of Wyoming, the largest coal producing region of the U.S., surface coal mines are reported to release as much as 4,000 tons of nitrogen oxides annually just from blasting, as much as a medium sized coal-fired power plant.<sup>3</sup> These emissions can take the form of toxic orange clouds.

### **Clean Air Act Holds Solutions**

- Under Section 111 of the Clean Air Act, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency can list industrial categories that contribute to pollution that endangers public health and welfare.
- Upon listing, the EPA is required to promulgate “New Source Performance Standards” to ensure that new and modified sources utilize the best systems of emission reductions.
- A coalition of national and regional environmental groups have petitioned the EPA to list coal mines under Section 111, and to spur the development of New Source Performance Standards to limit methane and other harmful pollutants from mines.
- Other source categories, including gravel mines, coal-fired power plants, and refineries are subject to New Source Performance Standards.

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY: OFFICE OF ATMOSPHERIC PROGRAMS, GLOBAL MITIGATION OF NON-CO<sub>2</sub> GREENHOUSE GASES (2006) at I-3, *available at*

<http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/economics/downloads/GlobalMitigationFullReport.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. EPA, INVENTORY OF U.S. GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS AND SINKS: 1990-2007 (2009) AT 3-36, *available at*

[http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads09/GHG2007entire\\_report-508.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads09/GHG2007entire_report-508.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> BLM, DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT FOR THE WRIGHT AREA COAL LEASE APPLICATIONS, Wyoming Bureau of Land Management at 3-70—3-73 (June 2009), *available at*

<http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/wy/information/NEPA/hpdo/Wright-Coal.Par.74001.File.dat/DEIS.pdf>

## Controls at Hand

- Methane is a potent greenhouse gas, but also a valuable product. At a price of \$4.00 per thousand cubic feet, the value of methane released by coal mines in the U.S. annually is more than \$640,000,000. Controls can recover methane from coal mines for use, simultaneously protecting health and safety, and yielding a savings.
- Overall, the EPA estimates that nearly 50% of all of U.S. coal mine methane emissions can be reduced at a zero net cost, while more than 85% can be reduced at a cost of \$15/ton.<sup>4</sup> Factoring in the health benefits of reducing methane, the benefit of reducing methane could be as much as \$240/ton of methane reduced.<sup>5</sup>
- Technologies exist to limit other harmful pollutants, however standardization is needed. Control of nitrogen oxides, particulate matter, and other pollutants is not required under the Clean Air Act, leading to incentives for coal companies to avoid limiting emissions.
- New Source Performance Standards will establish consistency and accountability among the coal mining industry, yielding benefits for public health, safety, and the climate.

### For More Information Contact:

Jeremy Nichols, WildEarth Guardians, (303) 573-4898 x 1303, cell (303) 437-7663  
Kassie Siegel, Center for Biological Diversity, (760) 366-2232 x 302, cell (951) 961-7972  
Ginny Cramer, Deputy Press Secretary for the Sierra Club, (804) 225-9113 x 102  
Ted Zukoski, Staff Attorney, Earthjustice, (303) 996-9622

### Download a copy of the petition:

[www.wildearthguardians.org/\[still waiting for web address\]](http://www.wildearthguardians.org/[still waiting for web address])

### Download Images:

Methane venting at the West Elk Coal Mine in Western Colorado,  
<http://picasaweb.google.com/TZactivist/WellPadsAtWestElk?authkey=Gv1sRgCKqS0sv3yL3nGQ&feat=directlink#>.

Orange clouds and warning signs in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming,

<http://picasaweb.google.com/WildEarthClimate/PowderRiverBasinCoalMining#>.

---

<sup>4</sup> U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY: OFFICE OF ATMOSPHERIC PROGRAMS, GLOBAL MITIGATION OF NON-CO<sub>2</sub> GREENHOUSE GASES (2006), available at

<http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/economics/downloads/GlobalMitigationFullReport.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> West, J., *et al.*, "Global health benefits of mitigating ozone pollution with methane emission controls," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 103 (Mar. 14, 2006) at 3988.