

April 26, 2005

Opinion - today's editorials

"Minding the mountains"

Recently in the Forum, a whistleblower hero named Jack Spadaro wrote about the dangers facing one of the most vulnerable ecosystems in the world -- Central Appalachia's mountains.

Now retired from the Mine Safety and Health Administration, where he was harassed for trying to do his job, Mr. Spadaro warned that in the next few years more than 2,500 square miles of forests and streams will be devastated, not only by current mining but by the impact of old operations.

His concerns are shared by the high-visibility authors who last week were given a ground and air tour of decapitated hills and debris-choked hollows by Kentuckians for the Commonwealth. The writers were at a loss for words.

Gov. Ernie Fletcher is awakening to the problems too. He told a mountain leadership group last week that Kentucky's environmental reputation "is not good." He also released a report on coal slurry pollution that called for better controls on siting coal waste dams to prevent breakthroughs into underground mine works. The 58-page report from the Black Water Task Force said new slurry disposal methods should be considered, as well as more regular inspections of slurry ponds and pipes.

Both environmental advocates and industry types who were involved in producing this report understand that the stakes for public safety and the environment are high. Most of the nation's 650 coal waste dams are located in Central Appalachia, and some 225 slurry impoundments are located atop abandoned mine works.

Environmental Secretary LaJuana Wilcher and her former assistant Jean Dorton deserve praise for leading a disparate group toward compromise, and toward several progressive recommendations

What the Black Water Task Force wants for slurry pond operations is what House Bill 509 would have provided at mountaintop removal sites, had it passed in this year's General Assembly: that companies minimize impacts by keeping mine spoils out of the streams, and that mine spoil be managed for least-impact, not just greatest profit.. Too bad Committee Chairman Jim Gooch, D-Providence, kept HB 509 buried.

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