

Mining industry fears federal review of state-issued permits

'Absolutely no justification for it'

By DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER - Star-Tribune energy reporter | Posted: Friday, December 18, 2009 12:00 am |

U.S. Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., and six other GOP senators sent a letter to President Barack Obama this week criticizing what they claim is a "decision to review all state-issued coal permits."

"States have been regulating coal for decades -- but now the Obama Administration has announced another decision to exert even more control over our ability to manage our resources," Barrasso said in a prepared statement.

Mines commonly permit activities with state agencies such as the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality, which manages the state's primacy over federal water and air quality laws.

Wyoming Mining Association executive director Marion Loomis said he only learned last week that the Office of Surface Mining has proposed reviewing state-issued mine permits.

"There's absolutely no justification for it," Loomis said.

Loomis said the Office of Surface Mining recently extended a public comment period regarding its proposal to January 18.

Industry officials say they suspect the Office of Surface Mining's move was spurred by the ongoing controversy over mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia. Mountaintop removal mining involves blasting and dozing ridge tops to expose multiple seams of coal. The rock and dirt are typically dumped in fills that bury valleys and streams.

In April, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced it would delay and conduct a special review of two mountaintop coal mining permits, and possibly review dozens of other permits regarding mountaintop removal.

A Barrasso staffer said that while the effort is being made under the guise of mountaintop removal mining, any state doing surface mining with a stream in the middle of the area could be impacted.

Loomis said he knows of no current federal review over state-issued mining permits in Wyoming.

"We haven't seen the need to have a new inspection process over and above what the state is already doing," said Loomis.

Contact energy reporter Dustin Bleizeffer at 307-577-6069 or dustin.bleizeffer@trib.com. Go to <http://tribtown.trib.com/DustinBleizeffer/blog> to read Dustin's energy blog