

No edge seen for Wyo

By DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER

Star-Tribune energy reporter with wire reports
Saturday, March 28, 2009 9:05 PM MDT

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced this week it would delay and conduct a special review of two mountaintop coal mining permits. The move could delay up to 200 other mining permits, sparking concerns for jobs and coal production in the Eastern U.S.

The National Mining Association suggested the federal action threatens 77,500 coal mining jobs and 385 million tons of annual production in the eastern coal mining region.

Others dismissed those numbers as "absurd and shameless," and said Western coal producers shouldn't expect a significant shift of mining activity from East to West because of the EPA's recent actions.

"We're not talking about something that is going to shut down a single mining operation immediately. We're not talking about losing a single job, but maintaining the status quo," said Matt Wasson, interim director of Appalachian Voices, which advocates against mountaintop mining.

Wasson said coal production in Central Appalachia is on a downward trajectory anyway, because much of the high-quality, accessible coal seams have been mined. He said a Hill & Associates study, although somewhat outdated, would suggest that a gradual phase out of mountaintop mining in the area would put an end to about 14,000 jobs over the next two to 10 years.

"If there really are decreases in Appalachian production, then it's hard to see how that wouldn't benefit the Powder River Basin to some extent," over time, said Wasson.

Both Arch Coal Inc. and Peabody Energy have had significant coal holdings in the Eastern U.S. and in Wyoming. And both have sold properties in Central Appalachia in recent years.

"That's why Arch and Peabody are out of Central Appalachia. There's a good reason for that," said Wasson.

Arch Coal spokeswoman Kim Link said the EPA's mountaintop mining review wasn't even on her radar, and said Arch thinks that there's no need to shift its current mining activities.

Carol Raulston of the National Mining Association said the estimate of 77,500 coal mining jobs lost and 385 million tons of annual production threatened are a worst-case-scenario.

Raulston said the problem is that some of the permits under review had already been delayed because of lawsuits. In addition, the EPA's review is of all U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' 404 permits, and those are required for most all mining activities in the region -- not just mountaintop removal.

"The EPA said it will perform an expeditious review. We hope that's the case," said Raulston. "We feel this process should be more transparent. Our concern is that it's open-ended and there's no time-frame for this review."

Mountaintop removal mining involves blasting and dozing ridgetops to expose multiple seams of coal. The rock and dirt is typically dumped in fills that bury valleys and streams.

Contact energy reporter Dustin Bleizeffer at 307-577-6069 or dustin.bleizeffertrib.com