

Wyoming leaders don't dig BLM coal lease change

By BOB MOEN - Associated Press writer | Posted: Thursday, March 25, 2010

CHEYENNE -- New federal guidelines for reviewing how mining companies expand their coal leases have stoked concern among Wyoming industry and government officials of more bureaucratic red tape that will cost jobs.

At issue is a new Bureau of Land Management policy that requires Washington review of certain public notices that local BLM offices previously had the freedom to publish on their own without approval from agency headquarters.

The BLM says its new police is merely an attempt to improve its handling of coal lease applications.

Wyoming is the nation's leading coal producer, accounting for about 40 percent of all U.S. coal production and directly employing some 6,700 workers.

In order to maintain coal production, coal mines expand into new tracts containing coal deposits as they mine and reclaim tracts where they are currently operating.

Since most of the coal lies within BLM-owned land in Wyoming, coal companies have to apply for and buy new coal leases through the federal agency. Because of the intense environmental scrutiny and public review associated with such applications, it can take years for a company to get permission to mine new coal deposits.

In December, the BLM instructed its local offices that certain Federal Register notices required in the application process must be submitted to the Department of Interior in Washington for approval. Previously, not all such notices were reviewed by the department.

In a letter to Wilma Lewis, assistant secretary for the Interior Department's land and minerals management, Gov. Dave Freudenthal, Sens. Mike Enzi and John Barrasso and Rep. Cynthia Lummis protested the change.

"By centralizing the decision in the Washington office, the department is adopting an excessively bureaucratic review structure that lacks commonsense," the letter said.

Marion Loomis, executive director of the Wyoming Mining Association, said the change makes no sense because it can only elongate an already exhaustive review process.

"I don't see any improvement in any of the environmental aspects or anything in the process that is better because of it," Loomis said.

The change will be particularly troublesome for companies that were nearing approval for several new coal leases and expecting to have those new coal deposits available for mining soon, he said.

The fear for those companies is that their mining operations will be interrupted or slowed if the coal lease approval is delayed.

But BLM spokeswoman Celia Boddington said in a telephone interview from Washington that the agency's goal is to create a more uniform and complete coal lease review process by the agency.

The new system could speed up the process by helping to eliminate errors in Federal Register notices that caused delays in coal lease applications, Boddington said.

"We are committed to moving Federal Register notices expeditiously," she said. "We recognize that they are critical to doing the BLM's business on the ground, that they affect communities and livelihoods."