

Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, mountaintop removal coal mining is “a mining practice where the tops of mountains are removed, exposing the seams of coal.” Mountaintop mines can remove 500 feet or more of the summit to reach buried seams of coal; earth from the mountaintop is then dumped as “fill” in the neighboring valleys. Fill from mountaintop removal mines has buried over 1000 miles of streams in the Appalachian region and the mines have leveled at least 800 square miles of mountaintops.

Coal mining in Appalachia is a complex issue. On the one hand, coal mines provide well-paying work in a region that has been systemically poor for most of its history. Many families have worked in the mines for generations, despite the difficulties and dangers of this work. Coal mining is an integral part of the history and rich cultural traditions of the region. Coal is the primary source of electricity for much of the United States because coal is a cheap and abundant source of energy.

On the other hand, the relatively recent practice of mountaintop removal mining is destroying the mountains, streams and hollows that are so much a part of the fabric of life in these ancient mountains. Once clear mountain streams are contaminated with mine waste or buried under rubble; blue mountain vistas are reduced to grey-brown gravel pits; and communities are displaced. Families are either forced to leave the land that has sustained their families for generations or suffer health consequences that can be life-threatening. And mountaintop mines employ far fewer people than traditional underground mines, so unemployment rises and people who were already struggling to make ends meet are forced to leave the land they love to find work.

In 1999, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly passed a social policy resolution expressing strong concerns about mountaintop removal mining and the impacts it is having on the people and land in the Appalachian region. The resolution urged federal and state legislators to favor other types of coal mining over this destructive practice and to pass legislation that promotes alternative energy resources over the continued use of coal.

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