

Ethics of Energy: Coal Leasing on Public Lands

*“Do not say to yourself,
‘my power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’
But remember the Lord your God...”*
Deuteronomy 8:17-18



Coal Leasing on Public Lands

The federal government manages public lands, which belong to us all, and are our collective responsibility. The United States Department of Interior’s Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has responsibility for coal leasing on approximately 570 million acres.¹ BLM receives revenues on coal leasing at three points: a bonus paid at the time BLM issues the lease, an annual rental payment of \$3.00 per acre or fraction thereof, and royalties paid on the value of the coal after it has been mined. The Department of the Interior and the state where the coal was mined share the revenues.

Decisions about Coal Leasing on Public Lands Matter to Our Communities

For the first time in since 1986, the Department of Interior will undertake a careful review of the federal coal program by preparing a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Specifically, it will focus on:

- 1) The appropriate leasing mechanisms to determine how, when, and where to lease
- 2) How to account for the environmental and public health impacts of the coal program
- 3) How to ensure the sale of public resources results in a fair return to American taxpayers, including whether current royalty rates should be adjusted.²

The federal government owns approximately one third of total coal reserves nationwide,³ so the decisions we make today will significantly impact where, how, and for what price we extract coal from our public lands.

Christian communities are deeply concerned about justice in our energy system. We want our families to be healthy, for those who want to work to have access to jobs with dignity, and for God’s creation to thrive. Our current systems for coal stewardship on public lands can be dramatically improved. When considering a coal lease we must not jeopardize our communities’ health nor the health of God’s creation. Yet, we know impoverished communities and communities of color are most likely to suffer health impacts of mining. We must also ensure that when coal mining does occur, local communities reap the benefits.

“It is God who created the earth and saw that it was good, God who sustains the earth and seeks to hold its processes together, God who judges sin and greed, and God who reveals in Jesus Christ that love and justice are the essence of God’s power.

God is the inexhaustible source of energy for personal, social, and ecological transformation. Although we are complicit in the evils we face, we can repent of our own sinful misuse and abuse of the Earth as we confess our sins.

As recipients of God’s endless mercy, this redemptive energy frees and empowers us to be good stewards of God’s creation.”

~ The Power to Change: US Energy Policy and Global Warming, Adopted by the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in

¹ Bureau of Land Management website, retrieved on April 24, 2016 http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/energy/coal_and_non-energy.html

² Bureau of Land Management Fact Sheet: Modernizing the Federal Coal Program, retrieved on April 24, 2016

http://www.blm.gov/style/medialib/blm/wo/Communications_Directorate/public_affairs/news_release_attachments.Par.47489.File.dat/Coal_Reform_Fact_Sheet_Final.pdf

³ Headwater Economics, retrieved on April 24, 2016 <http://headwaterconomics.org/energy/coal/coal-royalty-valuation>

What do Christian faith teachings say?

Based on consultation with Creation Justice Ministries' member communions, Creation Justice Ministries uses four lenses to consider climate and energy issues: stewardship, sufficiency, sustainability, and justice.

Stewardship

Christians believe "the Earth is the Lord's, and everything in it," (Psalms 24:1). Therefore, we are stewards, not owners, of God's creation. We are responsible for ensuring the gifts of God's creation are rightly shared with all people and all species today, as well as with future generations.

Coal extracted from public lands is an important source of energy and revenue for the United States. Yet, estimates show that from 2008-2012, coal companies underpaid royalties to the federal government by more than \$620 million.⁴ In 2013, the Department of Interior Office of the Inspector General found the Bureau of Land Management was not receiving a fair return for coal,⁵ and the Government Accountability Office discovered a lack of uniformity in how states price coal.⁶ Our communities need this money for common good projects such as schools and roads.

Sufficiency

God has provided abundantly for us, but we will only experience abundance when we know when we have enough. This means we may need to collectively reduce our energy consumption as we reduce the amount of mining.

Sustainability

When we mine coal, we take from God's creation, and in some cases, land and water cannot be reclaimed. Indefinitely continuing this pattern of taking from God's creation without giving back is un-sustainable. Therefore, transitioning to renewables is the inevitable, necessary, and moral choice.

Justice

As pricing and decision-making surrounding coal undergo changes, we must ensure communities most dependent on fossil fuels aren't left behind. Philippians 2:4 reminds us, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Any evaluation of the federal coal program must include plans for just economic transitions for workers.

What Can We Do?

Creation Justice Ministries seeks to reform the federal coal program so all communities are treated fairly, and that as our nation transitions to cleaner sources of energy, the communities that are negatively impacted have access to new economic opportunities.

Creation Justice Ministries invites people of faith and good conscience to participate in the public dialogue on coal leasing on public lands by:

1. Attending public listening sessions in: Casper, Wyoming; Salt Lake City, Utah; Knoxville, Tennessee; Seattle, Washington; Grand Junction, Colorado; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
2. Write opinion pieces about our coal economy for your local newspaper.
3. Get active in the public dialogue on social media at #reformcoal, and tag @Interior.

⁴ Headwater Economics: An Assessment of U.S. Federal Coal Royalties. (p. 18). Retrieved on April 24, 2016 at <http://headwaterseconomics.org/wphw/wp-content/uploads/Report-Coal-Royalty-Valuation.pdf>

⁵ US Department of Interior, Office of the Inspector General. Coal Management Program. Retrieved on April 24, 2016 at <https://www.doioig.gov/reports/coal-management-program-us-department-interior>

⁶ Government Accountability Office. Retrieved on April 24, 2016 at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-14-140>