

Mike Johnson

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Hearing on H.R. 5259 June 14, 2016 10am

I have been a union member for 45 years with 31 of those years at Smurfit-Stone paper mill in Missoula, MT, the last 20 of those years as a union officer. In March 2010 when the mill closed I accepted a staff position with the International Union of Operating Engineers, Local 400 in eastern MT. I have been representing the coal miners at Westmoreland Coal's Absaloka, Colstrip, and Savage mines for the last 6 years.

I stand in support of H.R. 5259. Coal is currently under attack all over the world, not only by climate change but by natural gas prices. Coal will always be needed to power our homes and the economy. Natural gas prices have gone up 25% in the last couple of weeks and will continue to rise as oil production slows. Prices for renewable energy are too high to keep our factories running as Germany has already found out. In Montana I cannot afford to see my energy prices increase by two or threefold. We should be building new clean coal powered plants and develop technology to clean up the ones we have all over the world.

Montana and the Tribal lands in our state have hundreds of years of coal reserves. The Crow tribe receives most of its income from coal royalties. The Crow tribe laid off 25% of the tribal employees in February because coal sales have dropped. The Absaloka mine on Tribal lands has gone from 161 hourly employees in October to 80 currently. This reservation already has a 25% unemployment rate. There are no jobs in their homeland to be trained for. The town of Colstrip just over the hill from the Absaloka mine has 300 hourly miners and about 300 power plant operators. This small town has some of the best schools, parks and other public facilities in the state. This power plant is under threat of closure from the clean power plan and western utility companies. The residents have already seen their property values drop and closure would make them worthless. The small town of Roundup north of Billings recently laid off 200 miners because of overseas demands shrinking.

These miners and power plant operators have an average age of about 55 years. They have been mining coal all their lives. They are not old enough to retire and too old to try to train for new trades which would then require moving away from the place they have been for generations.

I have personally seen the results of job closures and they are not pretty. I lost five friends to suicide since the mill closed. Others who had to relocate were ripped away from their family and friends. The loss of thirty thousand forest product jobs in Montana has inundated the job markets in the state with medical techs and other associate degree holders. To lose hundreds of more seventy thousand dollar a year jobs with good health benefits and pensions is too much to bear.

Montana and its Tribes deserve a seat at the table when it comes to coal leases and all coal issues.