

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Alan S. Lowenthal
Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Oversight Hearing on

Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement's Abandoned Mine Lands Program

June 7, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to thank you for holding this hearing on general oversight of the Abandoned Mine Lands program.

The Abandoned Mine Land reclamation program embodies a key principle that the American people demand: the idea that polluters pay.

The polluters, not the American people, should pay to ensure that families and communities have clean air, clean water, and clean land.

The coal industry left behind a legacy of pollution from centuries of lax oversight and overly permissive laws. Rivers running red from acid mine drainage, waste piles shedding debris and clogging streams, children at risk of falling into open mine shafts, and massive scars on the landscape – this was our inheritance from hundreds of years of unregulated coal mining.

Forty years ago this August, the country enacted the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, which required the coal industry to chip in and pay for fixing the health, safety, and environmental hazards that they had created. The polluters would pay.

Four years later, Congress passed the Superfund Law, which said the same thing to the oil and chemical industries: the polluters would pay to clean up hazardous waste sites.

Sadly, the oil industry got off the hook in 1996, and now the cost of cleaning up abandoned hazardous waste sites falls to the taxpayers.

Of course, the Trump Administration just proposed a 30 percent cut to the Superfund program – over three hundred (300) million dollars – so it seems like the idea now is that no one should pay to clean these sites up, and people can just learn to live with polluted water and toxic waste dumps in their backyard.

The hardrock mining industry – the largely internationally-owned conglomerates that extract billions of dollars of gold, silver, and other precious metals from public lands without paying a dime in royalties – that industry has never been required to bear the cost of its history of pollution.

That needs to change, Mr. Chairman, and I hope we will start looking at how the hardrock mining industry can be held accountable.

But the coal industry, for all their other faults – and I believe they have numerous faults – the coal industry has been helping clean up abandoned coal mines for forty years.

However, the problem is far from solved. There are still roughly 10 billion dollars' worth of abandoned coal mine sites that need to be addressed, and the fees being paid by the coal industry to clean up those sites expire in only four years.

People who lived through the last reauthorization debate know that four years is not too early to start the process. If anything, it may be cutting it close.

Thankfully, it appears that one of the biggest issues Congress has been grappling with, funding health benefits for coal miners, has been addressed. But we still need to make sure their pension benefits are protected.

And we need to provide new job and economic opportunities for workers and communities who are being hit hard by the market forces that are rapidly eroding coal's relevance to our economy.

The President made a big show during the campaign of pretending to love coal miners and saying he would bring relief to their towns.

But his budget proposes to do the exact opposite. He would eliminate the Appalachian Regional Corporation and the Economic Development Administration, while slashing Community Development Block Grants, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the USDA Rural Water Program, and other programs that directly help people in Appalachia who are struggling.

These proposals are short-sighted, they are heartless, and they would do nothing but hurt the health and economic well-being of people in Appalachia, and in fact throughout the entire country.

In contrast, the A-M-L program has had a real and positive impact on people's lives, by safeguarding their children, cleaning their water, and providing them with jobs. It needs to be reauthorized.

And I think today is an excellent time to start that process in earnest.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here, and I yield back the balance of my time.