

Chairman Alan S. Lowenthal
Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Legislative Hearing:
UMWA Health Benefits & Pensions
July 24, 2019

The Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources will come to order.

The Subcommittee is meeting today to hear testimony on H.R. 934, the Health Benefits for Miners Act of 2019 and H.R. 935, The Miners Pension Protection Act of 2019.

Under Committee Rule 4(f), any oral opening statements at hearings are limited to the Chairman and the Ranking Minority Member or their designees.

I ask unanimous consent that all other Members' opening statements be made part of the hearing record if they are submitted to the Subcommittee Clerk by 5:00 pm today. [*pause*] Hearing no objection, so ordered.

To begin, I want to thank our witnesses for being here today.

And I want to thank all of those in the audience, and those in our other hearing room watching this on tv, for coming to Washington to share your stories and press your case that we need to fulfill our obligations that you have earned through decades of backbreaking labor that helped make this country what it is.

For decades, coal miners supplied the United States with the coal that kept the lights on.

Coal miners built the world's largest economy at the expense of their health and their lives.

And coal miners were instrumental in winning World War II.

In 1946, the federal government and coal mining companies made a promise to these miners.

The government and the companies promised that, because of their important role in building our country, U-M-W-A coal miners would be guaranteed health benefits and pensions when they retired.

This promise has been affirmed repeatedly over the past 70 years by Congress and by Republican and Democratic Administrations alike.

But over time, through no fault of their own, these workers have been losing the security that they worked so hard to earn.

Our energy mix is moving away from coal. But that does not mean we can leave the workers or their families behind.

Coal company bankruptcies have put the the U-M-W-A health benefits and pension funds in crisis.

If these funds fail, more than 100,000 retired miners and their families could be left out in the cold, while a handful of coal company executives game the bankruptcy system and hoard the windfalls for themselves.

Coal company bankruptcies show no signs of stopping. And each time it happens we inevitably hear about restructuring and assets being transferred and new companies being formed from the wreckage.

And we also hear that the generations-old responsibilities to pay for the retired, the sick, the widows and the widowers – those responsibilities are lifted.

The coal companies restructure and continue on with business as usual, their workers and their retirees end up bearing the burden.

The people at the top always seem to make out just fine. The people who helped them get there are the collateral damage.

This is flat-out wrong. These companies are breaking their promise. There are stories that companies are intentionally manipulating the system to get freed of their responsibilities.

If that's the case, then this is more than a case of economics no longer favoring coal. It means there's something wrong with the entire system.

We don't have the ability to change bankruptcy laws in this committee. But we do have the ability, and the responsibility, to make sure those people who are getting hurt are still taken care of.

There is very little time to act.

As even more companies have declared bankruptcy over the past year, the funding situation has reached a breaking point.

The pension fund will be insolvent as early as 2022, and some retirees may lose health benefits as early as this fall.

Congress passed temporary fixes over the past few years, but these fixes have only extended the uncertainty and suffering that retired miners and their families have been shouldering for years.

It's past time for a permanent solution.

And it's time we kept our promise to the miners who built our country. That's exactly what H.R. 934 and H.R. 935 will do.

With that, I look forward to the testimony from our witnesses, and I now recognize Ranking Member Gosar for his opening statement.