

Opening Statement
Chair Alan S. Lowenthal
Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Legislative Hearing

Restoring Abandoned Mine Lands, Local Economies, and the Environment

H.R. 1146, H.R. 1733, H.R. 1734

March 18, 2021

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

Good morning, or good afternoon, depending on where you are, and welcome to the Subcommittee.

We are meeting today to hear testimony on three bills: Representative Cartwright's Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act Amendments of 2021, Representative Cartwright's Revitalizing the Economy of Coal Communities by Leveraging Local Activities and Investing More Act of 2021, otherwise known as the RECLAIM Act, and Representative LaHood's Community Reclamation Partnerships Act.

Under Committee Rule 4(f), any oral opening statements at hearings are limited to the Chair and the Ranking Minority Member or their designees. This will allow us to hear from our witnesses sooner and help Members keep to their schedules.

Therefore, I ask unanimous consent that all other Members' opening statements be made part of the hearing record if they are submitted to the Clerk by 5:00 pm today or the close of the hearing, whichever comes first; [PAUSE] hearing no objection, so ordered.

Without objection, the Chair may also declare a recess subject to the call of the Chair.

Without objection, the Member from Pennsylvania, Representative Thompson, and the Member from Wyoming, Representative Cheney, are authorized to question the witnesses in today's hearing.

As described in the notice, statements, documents, or motions must be submitted to the electronic repository at HNRCdocs@mail.house.gov.

Additionally, please note that, as with in-person meetings, Members are responsible for their own microphones. As with our in-person meetings, Members can be muted by staff only to avoid inadvertent background noise.

Finally, Members or witnesses experiencing technical problems should inform committee staff immediately.

With that, I will begin my opening statement.

First, I want to note the bipartisan nature of this hearing. These bills have significant support from Members of both parties, and I'd like to thank Ranking Member Stauber and the Minority committee staff for working so cooperatively with us in putting together this hearing.

Coal is a complicated issue – for centuries, coal mining was the foundation of life in Appalachia. The industry provided union jobs for generations of families. It helped build entire towns and supported vibrant communities. And these communities take justified pride in the role that coal played in helping this country win World War 2.

But, while the coal industry boomed, its impacts on the environment and the health of nearby residents was often a secondary consideration. Centuries of poorly regulated coal mining led to tens of thousands of unreclaimed abandoned mines, mountains of waste rock, dangerous and unstable mine shafts, and watersheds so polluted that they run red with contamination.

In 1977, Congress passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, or “SMACK-ra,” which created a system to ensure that all new surface coal mines would not leave behind those same scars.

“SMACK-ra” also established a system for cleaning up mines abandoned before 1977, with coal companies chipping in a small fee per ton of coal mined to fix their industry’s legacy of health, safety, and environmental hazards.

So far, over 6 billion dollars have been provided to states and tribes across the country to clean up these sites. That’s 6 billion dollars of cleaner water, cleaner land, jobs, and economic opportunity. I look forward to hearing about some of those successes today.

But the cleanup is far from done. There are still an estimated 11-point-4 billion dollars’ worth of abandoned mines left to reclaim in the United States. And those numbers continue to rise with inflation and as new hazards are discovered.

Unfortunately, the Abandoned Mine Land program is expiring on September 30th of this year. That leaves less than six months for Congress to get this done, but given the tremendous bipartisan support for this program I believe we can make that happen in time.

If the A-M-L fee were to expire today, there would only be a little over two billion dollars left. That is not nearly enough, and this problem isn’t going away on its own.

Beyond just cleaning up abandoned mines, investing in coal country is more important now than ever.

With coal in decline and record numbers of companies filing for bankruptcy, places like Appalachia are being left behind with devastating environmental degradation, polluted drinking water, and chronic health impacts. Workers need new jobs and opportunities, and they need them now.

Reauthorizing the A-M-L Fund and passing the RECLAIM Act and the Community Reclamation Partnerships Act will do just that. They will help revitalize regions of the country hit hardest by the coal industry's downturn. These bills will help create good jobs and a safer, healthier environment.

The Community Reclamation Partnerships Act is a Good Samaritan bill that lets third-party groups like environmental and wildlife organizations aid in A-M-L projects without assuming liability – something that will speed up reclamation and encourage more community involvement.

The RECLAIM Act specifically emphasizes economic rebirth by funding projects that lead to community development after reclamation – things like new commercial spaces or parks for recreation that put people back to work in the short and long term.

Importantly, RECLAIM projects will be developed with community input – something that is essential to making the best possible decisions. No one knows what will benefit a community more than the people who actually live there.

This challenge is not unique to Appalachia or to coal country. Nor is it unique to our current time. Scores of fossil-fuel dependent communities around the country have lived through generations of boom and bust cycles that gutted towns and destroyed families because of the simple vagaries of the market. If a town survived and the people stayed, they would wait until prices recovered and the good times could roll again. Then the process would repeat.

We can decide to double-down on this pattern and consign millions of Americans to an ongoing cycle of relative good times followed by crippling local depressions.

Or – we can use the need to carry out an energy transition to create new opportunities, ones that are longer-lasting, healthier for people, and safer for the environment.

RECLAIM is one example of how to do that. It is a critical part of upholding our promises to not abandon the people and communities that helped build this country.

It is only part of what we need to do to help those areas that have a hard time seeing what their future will be on the other side of this energy transition. I'm proud to be supporting RECLAIM, and I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues on both side of the aisle to find solutions for all of the workers and communities across the country that so badly need help.

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