

**Statement and Script – Chair Alan S. Lowenthal**

**Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Oversight Hearing**

*Environmental Justice for Coal Country: Supporting Communities Through the Energy Transition*

**June 15, 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 Environmental Justice for Coal Country: Supporting Communities Through the Energy Transition.

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, Representative O'Halleran is 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](mailto: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.

From Appalachia in the east, to tribal nations in the southwest, to the Powder River Basin in the northern Great Plains, coal mining communities across the country are facing a profound crisis.

For decades, coal was the dominant source of energy in the United States. The coal mining industry supported over eight hundred thousand jobs at its peak in the 1920s. These were well-paid, union jobs that supported multiple generations of families.

These communities take well-deserved pride in the role that coal played in building a prosperous U.S. economy and helping to win World War 2. But now, it is imperative that we change how this nation produces energy.

There is no doubt that a transition away from fossil fuels like coal to zero-emission energy sources is essential if we are to leave a recognizable world for our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren, and beyond.

At recent hearings, this subcommittee examined bipartisan legislation to address the historic legacy of abandoned mine lands. Today's hearing is an opportunity to focus on the currently unfolding crisis in coal country.

The rise of low-cost renewable energy and competition from natural gas have led to the closure of hundreds of coal mines over the past few years. The corporate backbone of the industry is falling apart. Since 2012, more than sixty coal companies have filed for bankruptcy.

But those that are hurting the most from the industry's downturn are not the coal company executives – no – they're doing just fine – often giving themselves huge bonus right before filing for bankruptcy. In fact, one coal company paid eight of its

current and former executives more than 10 million dollars in salary, bonuses, and severance in the 12 months before filing for bankruptcy.

The people hurting the most are the workers and their families. Communities are facing declining economic prospects, a black lung epidemic, polluted water, and ravaged landscapes. This is not right, this is not fair, and it's a matter of environmental justice.

The solution to this unfolding crisis is not to provide false hope that there will be a resurrection of coal. That is not going to happen.

The solution is to provide new opportunities for workers and new options for towns to grow and thrive.

To protect these communities at the front lines of the energy transition, we need to make a commitment to manage the collapse of the coal industry in a way that promotes environmental justice, protects workers, and creates opportunities for long-term economic development.

Unfortunately, right now the rules and regulations in place at the Department of the Interior are not up to the task.

The Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, or O-S-M-R-E, needs to shore up regulations and tactics to hold coal companies responsible for cleaning up their messes and to better protect workers and communities.

Today we will hear from expert witnesses who have first-hand experience dealing with the fallout of lax safeguards for the coal industry at O-S-M-R-E and the wide-ranging negative impacts on the places they call home.

We will also hear from a former director of O-S-M-R-E for his insights into how the agency should be re-tooled to build a more sustainable and prosperous future.

I look forward to hearing our witness's stories and discussing potential solutions.

Before I turn it over to Ranking Member Stauber, I want to note that we did not invite the administration to testify at today's hearing. O-S-M-R-E does not yet have an appointed director, but I look forward to working with the Biden administration on the potential reforms that we will discuss today.

With that, I recognize Ranking Member Stauber for his opening statement.