

**Rep. John Yarmuth**  
**H.R. 2073, the Appalachian Communities Health Emergency Act**  
**June 9, 2022**

Good morning, Chairman Lowenthal, Ranking Member Stauber, and members of the Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources. Thank you for inviting me to be here as you consider the important legislation before you this morning, including my bill, the Appalachian Communities Health Emergency—or ACHE Act.

This legislation is simple. It would require that a federal study of the health effects on the surrounding communities of mountaintop removal mining sites is conducted before new mining permits are issued. It's a bill I've testified on here before, and something I worked closely on for nearly a decade with our former colleague and Harlan County, Kentucky native—the late, great Congresswoman Louise Slaughter.

It's not hard to see why this study is so important. In fact, all you need to do is look at this bottle of water that I brought with me today.

None of us would drink this. If you lived in a home where this substance came from the faucet, you wouldn't cook with it. You wouldn't bathe your kids in it. I say "substance" because it seems wrong to describe this as water. It's not only orange and cloudy, if I leave it on the table here for a minute, you'll see it separate into layers.

And yet this is what comes out of the faucets in homes in parts of eastern Kentucky. This is the reality of what countless families who reside near mountaintop removal sites in Appalachia are forced to live with. This bottle was given to me years ago by the Urias family of Pike County, Kentucky, and this is straight from the well on their property—the third well they tapped after powerful mining blasts shifted and either dried up or forced their first two wells to fail. Chemicals from nearby blast sites had leached into the water table, resulting in arsenic levels more than 130 times the level deemed "safe" by the EPA.

But the Urias family also told me about the harsh effects the mountaintop blasting had on their lives, the land on which they lived, and the community they call home. They told me about how their pediatrician warned them to make sure their then-newborn baby didn't open her mouth at all as they bathed her to be sure she wouldn't accidentally ingest any of the water. And we can see their pain in the broader health data that *is* available for the Appalachian region: higher rates of cancer than the national average, more instances of asthma, COPD, countless other respiratory illnesses, birth defects and more. You name it, these communities are dealing with it.

And while I think the connection is clear, the unfortunate reality is that we've never conducted a federally funded health study in these communities. Permit after permit has been issued allowing coal companies to blast apart the mountains these families live among, but they've never looked into what happens when those materials are released into the air, or into nearby

streams and rivers, or tumble downhill seeping into the ground until it reaches the sources of water these families rely on.

I want to be honest: If it were up to me personally, I'd ban mountaintop removal mining entirely. I believe it is a destructive practice, producing smaller amounts of coal, polluting our waterways, and leaving behind a barren earth that is almost unusable.

But this legislation simply asks for a health study to determine if this practice should continue. It asks that we provide the families of Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Virginia where this surface mining process is used with the answers they deserve and need to protect their families.

You know – it was just a few years ago that unsafe levels of lead were discovered in the water supplied to the Cannon House Office Building – and everyone sprung into action. Notice from House Administration and the Architect of the Capitol went out almost immediately to every office urging us to not drink the water. Signs went up in the bathrooms and at water fountains throughout the building. And every office housed inside that building—including my own—was provided with a supply of jugs of safe, clean drinking water.

Don't the people of Appalachia deserve the same level of urgency? Shouldn't families in coal country be given the same amount of concern as we have for ourselves?

They need our help. Their health depends on it. So I urge you to join me in supporting this legislation to protect the hardworking people of coal country.