

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

H.R. 1731, "Revitalizing the Economy of Coal Communities by Leveraging Local Activities and Investing More (RECLAIM) Act of 2017."

April 5, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding a hearing on this bill, which embodies a number of bipartisan ideas and, I think, helps get our legislative agenda off on the right foot.

The idea behind the RECLAIM Act is to take part of the large unexpended balance in the Abandoned Mine Land Fund and devote it to projects where cleaning up mines leads to economic and community benefits.

This is, quite frankly, a win-win.

Coal communities throughout Appalachia are hurting. They have lost jobs, they have lost economic opportunities, and in many cases they have lost access to clean water and a healthy environment because of a legacy of mining pollution.

This bill gives us the opportunity to turn all of that around. Which is crucial, because this Administration seems to have no positive ideas of its own.

As we heard again and again over the past months, from industry analysts, utility heads, and coal company CEOs, those coal jobs are not coming back.

The President has sold the people of Appalachia a bill of goods – his policies may raise the bonuses of coal executives, but he will not raise the economic fortunes of the unemployed coal miners to whom he has promised so much.

As the CEO of Murray Energy said about the President and coal jobs, quote, “I suggested that he temper his expectations. He can’t bring them back.”

That’s the head of the largest coal company in the country saying that. A coal company that has no plans to reopen mines or hire new miners in the wake of the President’s climate denying executive order.

And the President proposed huge cuts to programs that directly help these hurting communities, such as completely eliminating the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Economic Development Administration.

So while the Administration is proposing to actually make things worse, this bill has the potential to make things better.

We’ve already seen promising evidence that this strategy can work. That bringing together stakeholders to identify promising abandoned mine sites that can be used to provide economic and community development opportunities works.

Pennsylvania and West Virginia have already identified a number of projects that will use seed money provided by Congress to reclaim abandoned coal mines and creates jobs and opportunity. I look forward to hearing more about some of those today.

Unfortunately, I worry that this bill, H.R. 1731, strays a bit far from the economic development goals that are the genesis of this program.

By only requiring an eventual economic development use for the lowest priority A-M-L sites, it provides an incentive for states to treat this money just as they would any other A-M-L cleanup money from the federal government.

There’s no question the funding is needed. There are roughly seven and a half billion dollars of high-priority sites that need to be reclaimed.

But if we want to address that, and we should, we need to be talking about the entire Abandoned Mine Land program, and its reauthorization, and the appropriate level of the fees, and how the money is distributed.

Separately, we also need to consider long-term fixes to the United Mine Workers of America health and pension funds, so that retired coal miners get the health care and benefits they and their families were promised.

That is why, Mr. Chairman, I would like to give you this letter from myself and my two colleagues from Virginia on the committee, Mr. Beyer and Mr. McEachin, asking for a hearing on the Mr. McKinley's Miners Protection Act, H.R. 179.

But returning to the goal of the RECLAIM Act, the language in the bill itself says its purpose it is to, quote, promote economic revitalization, diversification, and development in economically distressed mining communities.

The text of the bill, however, threatens to undermine that purpose by not requiring the money to be used on those very types of projects.

There are other provisions of the bill that I think may need some additional discussion before I can fully support it, but I hope that we can work constructively to get to that point and bring a bipartisan economic development solution to the House Floor.

I thank the witnesses for being here, and I yield back the balance of my time.