

Montana and Northern Wyoming Clergy of the United Church of Christ Comment on the Federal Coal Program

As Christians, we believe “the earth is the LORD’s, and the fullness thereof” (Psalms 24:1). Our understanding of property, as well as our systems for sharing wealth, are human constructs. We are not the source of our own power and wealth. All that we have comes from God, and returns to God. Therefore, all that comes from God’s earth is in our care for our short lifetimes, and we have the responsibility to care for it through future generations.

Rooted in this Christian faith perspective, we believe it is time to improve our stewardship of coal and the economy that surrounds coal, and we have an opportunity to do so right now.

For the first time since 1986, the Department of Interior will undertake a careful review of the federal coal program by preparing a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). This could have a major impact on Montana and Wyoming communities for the better. The Department of Interior’s work will specifically focus on the following three priorities: determining how, when, and where to lease; accounting for environmental and public health impacts of the coal program; and ensuring the sale of public resources results in a fair return to American taxpayers, including whether current royalty rates should be adjusted. We know our energy economy is going through inevitable changes, and in the long term, these changes will be best for God’s creation and our communities’ health.

As Christians, we are ready to face new truths the federal coal review may uncover with pastoral as well as practical responses. Already, we know that coal extracted from public lands is an important source of energy and revenue for the United States. Yet, estimates show that from 2008-2012, coal companies underpaid royalties to the federal government by more than \$620 million.¹ In 2013, the Department of Interior Office of the Inspector General found the Bureau of Land Management was not receiving a fair return for coal,² and the Government Accountability Office discovered a lack of uniformity in how states price coal.³ Our communities need this money for common good projects such as schools and roads, and it is simple fairness that these resources be used in a way that is fair and transparent.

However, we also know the markets for coal and our economy are changing, which means our job market is changing too. Our churches may feel this transition in our financial support, in our anti-poverty ministries, and in our pastoral care ministries. We believe it is a moral imperative that this federal coal review process include a conversation about a transition plan for coal economy workers and that local, state and the federal governments come together to take strong action to address this challenge.

In this time of energy economy transition, we believe our communities must read the signs of the times and face new truths with courage in community. We have faith in a God who provides abundantly, and we believe that new opportunities are on the horizon. Together, we will responsibly steward God’s creation, care for our communities’ health, and justly share the fruits of our labor.

Thank you,

¹ Headwater Economics: An Assessment of U.S. Federal Coal Royalties. (p. 18). Retrieved on April 24, 2016 at <http://headwaterseconomics.org/wphw/wp-content/uploads/Report-Coal-Royalty-Valuation.pdf>

² US Department of Interior, Office of the Inspector General. Coal Management Program. Retrieved on April 24, 2016 at <https://www.doiioig.gov/reports/coal-management-program-us-department-interior>

³ Government Accountability Office. Retrieved on April 24, 2016 at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-14-140>

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