Civil Disobedience Against Toxic Coal Sludge and Mountaintop Removal

Contributed by Charles Suggs
03 February 2009

A heartening follow-up to our Monday story on the rally, and NASA scientist James Hansen appeals to Obama. -ed
"Eight more arrests occurred today following a second wave of citizen protest at a toxic coal sludge lake and mountaintop removal site.
Massey Energy blasting would endanger the community and destroy permanent renewable energy potential."

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Feb. 3, 2009

Contact: Charles Suggs 304-854-7372

PETTUS, W.Va. - This morning five activists, who had chained themselves to a bulldozer and an excavator, and one videographer were arrested for trespassing at a mountaintop removal site. By afternoon, dozens of local residents, friends and supporters from throughout Appalachia converged at the mine's gate. Eight more citizens were arrested in the afternoon action.

The latest wave of protesters, trained in and committed to non-violence, delivered a letter to mine company officials. The letter, ultimately intended for Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship, insists that Massey cease the mountaintop removal operation on Coal River Mountain. (A copy of the letter is posted at http://climategroundzero.com/gate_letter.pdf).

Blasting for part of the operation could begin at any time, very close to a nine-billion-gallon toxic coal waste sludge dam called the Brushy Fork Impoundment. Blasting would occur above underground mines close to the dam and the lake of toxic coal waste it impounds.

Instead of mountaintop removal, residents and their supporters are advocating for a wind farm on the site as a safe alternative for cleaner energy and long-term jobs (www.coalriverwind.org).

"I fear for my friends and all the people living below this coal sludge dam," said Gary Anderson, who lives on the mountain near the site. "Blasting beside the dam, over underground mines, could decimate the valley for miles. The 'experts' said that the Buffalo Creek sludge dam was safe, but it failed. They said that the TVA sludge dam was safe, but it failed. Massey is setting up an even greater catastrophe here."

In 1972, a sludge dam operated by Pittston Coal Company failed and killed 125 people in Buffalo Creek, W.Va.

In 2000, a sludge dam operated by Massey Energy in Martin County, Ky., released approximately 300 million gallons of coal waste that broke through into underground mines. The EPA called that the worst environmental disaster in the Southeast.

Then, in December 2008, a coal ash sludge impoundment operated by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) failed near Harriman, Tenn. That disaster released over one billion gallons of toxic sludge that destroyed three homes, damaged twelve more and covered 300 acres.

The Brushy Fork coal sludge impoundment currently contains seven billion gallons and has a nine-billion-gallon capacity.

Residents have lost faith in their state government and taken their plea nationally.
Climate expert James Hansen, the head of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, said, “President Obama, please look at Coal River Mountain. Your strongest supporters are counting on you to stop this madness.”

“We can’t sit by while Massey jeopardizes the lives and homes of thousands of people,” said Vernon Haltom of Naoma, W.Va. “Governor Manchin and the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection have proven that they are unwilling to protect the citizens. What do they expect us to do? Will they wait until we’re in body bags to take this threat seriously?”

A 2008 report by the federal Office of Surface Mining revealed serious deficiencies in the WVDEP’s regulation of coal waste dams (www.wvgazette.com/News/200901110512?page=1&build=cache).

In November, WVDEP approved a permit revision allowing Massey to begin the mountaintop removal operation. Despite citizens’ objections, DEP denied public participation in its decision process.

Anderson added, “We need to stop the madness and stop Massey from blowing up our beautiful mountain. We need to go with the better energy option, and that’s a wind farm, which is perfect for Coal River Mountain. We could have a green energy future for the country, starting right here.”

Arrested in the morning action were Rory McImoil, Matt Noerpel, James McGuiness
Mike Roselle, Glen Collins and videographer Chad Stevens.

Arrested in the afternoon action were Lorelie Scarbro, Larry Gibson, Charles Nelson, Missy Petty, Mary Wildfire, Vernon Haltom, Allen Johson and Heather Sprouse

For updates, photos and video footage, go to http://climategroundzero.org.

###

Culture Change's coverage of rally against toxic coal sludge and mountaintop removal, on Feb. 2, 2009:

culturechange.org