

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF JEANIE ALDERSON
CHAIR, NORTHERN PLAINS RESOURCE COUNCIL

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCES

Hearing:

“Notice of Intent to Conduct a Review of the Federal Coal Leasing Program”

October 27, 2021

Thank you Chairman Lowenthal for the opportunity to address the committee today.

My name is Jeanie Alderson. I am from Birney, Montana. Together with my family I own and operate Bones Brothers Ranch, a cow/calf operation out of Birney, Montana, in Rosebud County. My husband and I also own Omega Beef Inc.; we sell grass-finished Wagyu beef directly to customers. I am also the Chairperson of Northern Plains Resource Council, a statewide grassroots conservation organization in Montana. Northern Plains organizes Montanans to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life.

I am proud to be the fourth generation of my family to raise beef in Montana. Our family homesteaded in southeastern Montana in the late 1880s. We have learned to ranch in this arid and fragile landscape. Our ranch receives between nine and thirteen inches of rain per year. Our life

and our business depend entirely on this small amount of precipitation. Making a living as a rancher is difficult. Forty percent of us have gone out of business since the 1980s. In southeastern Montana, ranching requires hard work, skill, and patience as we deal with market forces, drought, storms, fires, and increasingly erratic weather. All of this is made more difficult by the impacts of the federal coal program -- from coal seam fires to the changing global climate brought on by greenhouse gases from coal development.

In the Powder River Basin, 77% of the coal resources are owned by the United States government, and 83% of the surface above those coal deposits are owned by private landowners. One of the challenges that my neighbors and I continue to face are large, uncontrollable wildfires on our ranches that are sparked from underground fires in federally-owned coal seams. When this happens, ranching families and our small, rural, volunteer fire departments are the first to respond. If the fire gets bigger, we receive help from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management. Last year, the Richard Spring Fire burned over 170,000 acres in Rosebud County, Montana. Simultaneously, the Lame Deer Fire burned over 5,000 acres. Both of these fires were started by coal seams. Fighting these fires is expensive and dangerous, but what's most harmful is their effects. By burning pastures, fences, livestock, buildings, and water pipelines, coal seam fires can damage a ranch so that it becomes unusable, threatening our livelihood. Time and time again, it feels like private landowners are paying for damage to our property from minerals that belong to the federal government. Today, there is no part of the federal coal program that accounts for these coal seam fires or their effects on ranchers and landowners.

The federal coal program is a significant contributor to the United States' greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, according to the United States Geological Survey, burning fossil fuels from federal lands is the single largest source of carbon pollution in the country, and 60% of those emissions come from federal coal. As the effects of climate change take hold in the Northern Great Plains, our summers have become drier and our fire seasons longer. Damaging coal seam fires have become bigger and more frequent. According to data obtained from the State of Montana, in the 11 years from 2000 to 2010, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation recorded 14 coal seam fires in seven counties in southeastern Montana. In the 11 years from 2011 to today, they've recorded 200 -- a 1400% increase. From my ranch in Rosebud County, my family and I see few of the benefits of federal coal leasing, but we experience many of its costs in the effects of climate change.

The law that governs coal leasing directs the Bureau of Land Management to authorize leasing of coal on federal lands only as the agency "finds appropriate and in the public interest." Yet even as it has continued to approve coal leases to private companies for less than one dollar per ton, the BLM has not considered whether adding millions of tons of carbon pollution to the atmosphere is in the "public interest," and has not incorporated the climate impacts of leasing federal coal into its calculation of minimum bids for lease sales.

My organization, Northern Plains Resource Council, has long emphasized the importance of quality reclamation for all coal mines in the West. The Surface Mine Control and Reclamation Act requires that mined land be reclaimed "as contemporaneous as possible." Too often, surface mines in Montana and Wyoming have failed to meet this requirement. We believe that the

Bureau of Land Management should consider an applicant's record of contemporaneous reclamation in its coal leasing decisions. As the United States works to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions from the power sector, we further believe that Interior must consider policy options that help to plan and manage the decline of federal coal leasing and development in an orderly, structured way that provides time, space, and opportunity for a just and equitable transition for workers, communities, and coal-dependent state economies.

In my community, we are already seeing the impacts of global climate change, and I hope that the government adopts policies that will help us avoid worsening effects. I'm encouraged by the Department of the Interior's decision to conduct a review of the costs and the benefits of the current federal coal leasing program. At a time when our nation needs to decrease its reliance on fossil fuels in order to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, I think it is correct for the federal government to consider whether or not leasing additional tracts of federal coal for development is in the country's best interests.

Thank you, Chairman Lowenthal and members of the committee, for having me here today. I'll be happy to take anyone's questions.