

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 25, 2017

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke,

We were extremely disturbed to learn that the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) recently instructed the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NAS) to halt all work on the project titled *Potential Human Health Effects of Surface Coal Mining Operations in Central Appalachia*. This project, which was initiated by OSMRE in response to a request from the state of West Virginia, has been reviewing the growing body of research demonstrating the severe health impacts suffered by people who live near mountaintop removal (MTR) coal mines, such as increased rates of heart disease and lung cancer.¹

Peer-reviewed studies have already shown that self-reported cancer rates among residents of counties where MTR occurs are nearly double those of residents of non-mining areas, that chronic cardiovascular disease rates are significantly higher in areas impacted by MTR, and that children born in such areas are much more likely to suffer from birth defects.²

When complete, the OSMRE study would identify data gaps and potentially lead to “new approaches to safeguard the health of residents living near these types of coal mining operations.”³ Delaying or cancelling this study presents a significant and serious risk to the health of the people of Appalachia, and we urge you to immediately resume its funding.

The rationale provided to the NAS for halting the study—the “changing budget situation” at the Department of the Interior (DOI)—does not withstand scrutiny. The funding for the study is coming from Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 money that is available to be spent through the end of FY 2017, but the FY 2017 budget for OSMRE is \$12.6 million more than in FY 2016. If OSMRE were to cancel the study contract after this September for any reason other than default by the NAS, the unspent money would be lost to OSMRE and DOI. Cancellation would not improve the budget situation at OSMRE or the Department, and would result in the waste of approximately \$400,000 that has already been spent on five meetings of the study committee.

¹ Kurth, L., Kolker, A., Engle, M. et al. *Environ Geochem Health* (2015) 37:529. doi:10.1007/s1065301496695, and references therein.

² Hendryx, M., Wolfe, L, Luo, J. and Webb, B. *Self-Reported Cancer Rates in Two Rural Areas of West Virginia with and Without Mountaintop Coal Mining*, *J. of Community Health* (April 2012); Hendryx, M. and Esch, L. *Chronic Cardiovascular Disease Mortality in Mountaintop Mining Areas of Central Appalachian States*, *J. Rural Health* (Winter 2011); Ahern, M., Hendryx, H., et al. *The Association Between Mountaintop Mining and Birth Defects in Central Appalachia, 1996-2003*, *J. Environmental Research* (May 26, 2011).

³ <http://www8.nationalacademies.org/cp/projectview.aspx?key=49846>

To our knowledge, based on inquiries to the NAS, no other ongoing studies being funded by DOI have been halted in this manner. It appears that the decision to terminate the MTR health impacts study was an ideologically motivated effort to stop an independent scientific exploration of uncomfortable truths about the harm the coal mining industry causes to the health of those directly impacted by it. Terminating this study is a waste of taxpayer dollars and an attack on science, and shows that the administration values the public image of the coal mining industry more than the public health of the people of Appalachia. The Department of Interior and OSMRE should immediately reverse this decision and allow this critical study to continue unimpeded.

Sincerely,



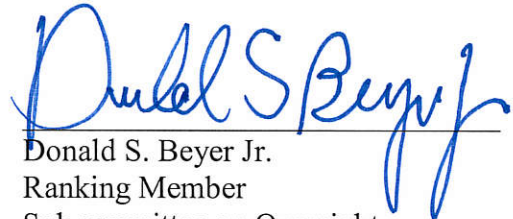
Raul M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources



Frank Pallone, Jr.
Ranking Member
House Committee on Energy & Commerce



John A. Yarmuth
Ranking Member
House Committee on the Budget



Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight
House Committee on
Science, Space, and Technology



A. Donald McEachin
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
House Committee on Natural Resources

cc: Ms. Glenda H. Owens, Acting Director, Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement