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Guardians Calls on Court to Block Public Lands Coal Mining in Northwest Colorado

Secret Mine Approvals Fueling Coal-fired Craig Coal-fired Power Plant, Threatening Clean Air

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Denver—In defense of clean air and the climate, [WildEarth Guardians today called on a federal court to overturn](#) the U.S. Interior Department's illegal and behind closed doors approval two coal mine expansions in northwestern Colorado.

"It's time to put an end to the Interior Department's practice of secretly approving public lands coal mining," said Jeremy Nichols, WildEarth Guardians' Climate and Energy Program Director. "Not only does mining take a tremendous toll on our western landscape, it's fueling coal-fired power plants that are spewing out millions of tons of carbon and other toxic air pollution."

In an opening brief filed today, Guardians exposed how the Interior Department and the U.S. Office of Surface Mining secretly and illegally approved the expansion of the Colowyo and the Trapper coal mines without analyzing the impacts to clean air or addressing the impacts of coal combustion.

Both the Colowyo and Trapper mines fuel Tri-State Generation and Transmission's Craig coal-fired power plant, the second largest coal-fired power plant in Colorado. Annually the three smokestacks of the power plant spew 12,000 tons of smog and haze-forming nitrogen oxide gases, equal to the amount released every year from 1.3 million passenger vehicles.

The power plant also releases nearly 9 million tons of carbon pollution every year, making it one of the largest single sources of greenhouse gases in Colorado.

In 2007 and in 2009, the Office of Surface Mining Interior Department approved expanded mining at Colowyo and Trapper, respectively. No public notice of these decisions was provided, even though they green-lighted the mining of more than 50 million tons of publicly owned coal from more than 5,000 acres.

In approving the mine expansions, the agencies relied on environmental reviews prepared in the 1970's and 1980's, and asserted that there would be "no significant" impacts to human health or the environment. Neither decision addressed or even acknowledged the current impacts of the Craig coal-fired power plant, including its air pollution impacts, even though it's one of the largest polluters in the state of Colorado.

"This is the worst kind of coal industry kowtowing that we've seen from the Interior Department," said Nichols. "Here, Interior not only kept the public in the dark, they completely turned their back on addressing the environmental impacts of mining and the inevitable impacts of coal burning."

Today's opening brief called on the U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado to overturn these mining approvals, not only over the failure of the Interior Department and Office of Surface Mining to provide any public notice, but also over the failure of these agencies to limit environmental impacts as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

So far, the Interior Department and Office of Surface Mining have defended their decisions, asserting they provided public notice by shelving documents at an agency library on the 34th floor of an office building in downtown Denver, and that relying on environmental reviews prepared in the 1970's and 1980's is appropriate.

Guardians has filed similar challenges over federal coal mining approvals in Montana and New Mexico. A ruling from the court is likely in 2015.