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Obama Administration Called on to Cancel Illegally Approved Coal Leases

2.5 Billion Tons of Coal Sold to Industry by Unauthorized Officials

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Denver—WildEarth Guardians today called on Obama Administration officials to [cancel at least 18 illegally approved federal coal leases](#) in Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming, a move that promises to halt any mining of these leases and to keep upwards of 2.5 billion tons of coal in the ground.

“It’s bad enough we’ve been leasing billions of tons of coal to industry even as we’re trying to transition from fossil fuels, now we find out the Obama Administration has been doing it illegally,” said Jeremy Nichols, WildEarth Guardians’ Climate and Energy Program Director. “This is a disaster in so many ways, but the Administration has a chance to fix its mistakes, protect the public interest and defend our climate.”

The call comes as a [string of rulings by a U.S. Interior Department appeals board](#) has made clear that only officials with delegated authority can approve the leasing of publicly owned coal. Over the years, the Interior Department has frequently allowed officials without delegated authority to approve leasing.

According to the appeals board, these unauthorized approvals have no legal effect and are not valid.

In spite of this, Interior officials have relied upon these illegal approvals to sell leases and approve mining. A conservative estimate by WildEarth Guardians indicates at least 18 leases in the western states of Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming have been illegally approved, many of which are now being mined.

It’s estimated Interior has illegally leased nearly 2.5 billion tons of publicly owned coal, although this figure is likely much higher. This is three times the [amount of coal produced in the U.S. in 2015](#). Much of this coal was illegally leased in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming, the largest coal producing region in the nation.

All told, this illicit leasing has opened the door for 4.7 billion metric tons of carbon pollution to be released, even while President Obama has called for aggressive action to combat climate change.

In a letter to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Director of the Bureau of Land Management, and the Director of the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, WildEarth Guardians called on the agencies to cancel all illegally approved coal leases and to withdraw any decisions allowing mining of these leases.

The illegal leases at issue expanded some of the largest coal mines in the western United States and even the nation. They include Tri-State Generation and Transmission’s Colowyo mine in northwest Colorado, Bowie Resources’ Skyline mine in central Utah, Peabody’s North Antelope-Rochelle mine in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming, and Arch Coal’s Black Thunder mine also in the Powder River Basin.

Peabody's coal operations stand to be most affected. All told, the company has bought more than 1.1 billion tons of illegal coal leases to expand its School Creek mine in Wyoming, North Antelope-Rochelle mine in Wyoming, and Sage Creek mine in Colorado.

In April, Peabody filed for bankruptcy and has since [laid off hundreds of workers at its operations in Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming](#).

“Peabody and other coal companies have gotten the break of a lifetime, buying illegal coal leases from the federal government to expand their mines and depend on our climate debt,” said Nichols. “The Interior Department needs to step up here and make right what it's done wrong, and that means canceling leases and withdrawing mining approvals.”

WildEarth Guardians' letter comes on the heels of a [moratorium on new coal leasing adopted by the Secretary of the Interior in January](#) and a [commitment from the Obama Administration to reform the federal coal program](#) to address its climate and economic impacts.