

Lawsuit Seeks to Block Colorado Coal Mine Expansion Threatening Climate, National Forest

Trump Administration Illegally Authorized Expansion of Arch Coal's West Elk Mine

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Global Research, July 06, 2019

[WildEarth Guardians](#) 3 July 2019

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Oil and Energy](#)

Five conservation groups [sued the Trump administration late yesterday](#) and called on a [federal judge to block approval of Arch Coal's West Elk mine expansion](#), which would invade the wildlands of western Colorado's Gunnison National Forest.

The lawsuit and motion for a preliminary injunction, filed in U.S. District Court in Denver, says the Interior Department violated federal law. The suit targets the failure of the department to take action to limit methane, a potent greenhouse gas. It also challenges the department's failure to fully account for the climate implications of authorizing more coal mining and to address the impacts of more mining to the region's streams and clean water.

"Driven by climate denial, the Trump administration is sacrificing Colorado's public lands to the coal industry," said Jeremy Nichols, climate and energy program director for WildEarth Guardians. "With this latest lawsuit and motion for a restraining order, we're taking a stand for our public lands and climate, as well as defending Colorado's clean energy future."

Located in the iconic West Elk Mountains just east of the town of Paonia, the West Elk mine is one of the largest coal mines in Colorado. It covers more than 20 square miles of the Gunnison National Forest next to the West Elk Wilderness Area.

"The West Elk mine is one of Colorado's worst climate disasters," said Matt Reed, public lands director at High Country Conservation Advocates in Gunnison County. "Given the climate crisis, it's imperative to confront this destructive, dirty mine and the wasteful practice of venting methane."

The West Elk mine is the single largest industrial source of methane pollution in Colorado. In 2017 the mine released more than 440,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide, equal to the annual emissions from more than 98,000 cars.

"We can't continue to mine coal and belch filthy methane into the air and stand any chance of having a livable planet," said Taylor McKinnon, a senior campaigner at the Center for Biological Diversity. "The West Elk expansion jeopardizes the environment and safety of Colorado communities and wildlife. And it threatens to derail the state's transition to clean, renewable energy."

In March the Interior Department approved the 2,000-acre expansion, allowing Arch Coal to mine nearly 18 million tons of new coal over three years in the Sunset Roadless Area, an undeveloped tract of the Gunnison National Forest.

Arch Coal has indicated it intends to begin bulldozing roads and drilling methane venting wells this week.

“Not only has this administration ignored consideration of any alternative that would reduce climate impacts of mining all this coal, but they also made the decision without any new analysis or public process,” said Peter Hart, staff attorney at Wilderness Workshop. “They’re ignoring the reality of climate change and ignoring legal obligations owed to the public, all to accelerate damaging fossil fuel mining on Colorado’s pristine public lands.”

When it approved the federal coal leases in 2017, the Bureau of Land Management agreed to consider ways to limit methane emissions once the mining was authorized. But the Interior Department rejected any further consideration of actions to reduce methane.

“The federal agencies that are meant to protect our communities from pollutants have failed us,” said Nathaniel Shoaff, senior attorney at the Sierra Club. “Rather than live up to its obligation to find solutions to polluting methane venting, the Interior Department turned its back on the problem leaving Colorado to deal with the harmful emissions.”

Although the conservation groups are challenging the federal coal leases before the U.S. Court of Appeals, the Interior Department’s approval gave Arch Coal the green light to mine and drill methane venting wells in the roadless area. In order to halt this mining, the groups filed a motion for a preliminary injunction with their lawsuit.

A federal judge is expected to schedule a hearing and rule on the groups’ motion for a preliminary injunction within the coming weeks.

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