

Mountaintop Mining Impact Is Reined In

By KRIS MAHER

The Obama administration on Wednesday moved to curtail the practice of mountaintop mining to extract coal, angering mining companies that said the move threatens thousands of jobs.

The Environmental Protection Agency announced it had held up 79 permit applications for projects related to so-called mountaintop removal—a practice of blasting hilltops and dumping unused rock and dirt into valleys and streams—in Central Appalachian states West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio and Tennessee, its broadest move to date against this type of mining. The agency said the work for which mining companies sought permission could violate the Clean Water Act, which the EPA enforces.

“Each of them, as currently proposed, is likely to result in significant harm to water quality and the environment,” the EPA said in a statement Wednesday.

Mountaintop mining involves clearing miles of forest and blasting away rock, reducing the elevation of a mountain by as much as 800 feet. Each mining project requires a dozen or so permits, often including permissions to fill nearby valleys with waste rock. Mining opponents say this harms or destroys streams.

Mining companies, which are required to rebuild mountains when work is finished, say their projects follow the permit process.

The EPA has long had the authority to police permits that re-

late to mining’s impact on streams, but until now it has challenged few of them. Wednesday’s move comes after months of decisions and statements by the EPA in which it appeared to side, in turns, with mining companies and with the environmental groups that oppose them. Now, the administration, pressed to pick between two of its pet issues—championing clean energy and the environment, versus providing jobs amid the worst downturn in decades—appears to be choosing the former, cheering activists.

The National Mining Association says the EPA’s ruling will discourage investment in the coal industry. About 180 additional coal-mining permits await a ruling by the EPA.

“If they’re not intending to damage the coal industry, then they’ve made an enormous miscalculation,” said Luke Popovich, a NMA spokesman.

Mining companies can modify and resubmit their applications, but some companies said projects may not be economical with the changes needed to receive EPA approval.

White House spokesman Benjamin LaBolt said the administration’s position has remained consistent. “The president has expressed concerns about the impacts of mountaintop removal on the health and welfare of the communities that surround them,” said Mr. LaBolt. He added that the administration recognizes coal’s role in the country’s energy mix and has made substantial investments to ensure its future “as part of our clean energy economy.”



Kris Maher/The Wall Street Journal

Mountaintop mining activity, which involves blasting hilltops to extract coal, on Kayford Mountain in West Virginia in July.

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