

Bill would halt new mountaintop removal permits while officials assess health dangers

WASHINGTON – Today, Congressman John Yarmuth (KY-3) and Congresswoman Louise Slaughter (NY-25) introduced the Appalachian Community Health Emergency Act (H.R. 526), legislation that would require the first comprehensive federal study of the health dangers of mountaintop removal coal mining. The legislation would place a moratorium on all new mountaintop removal mining permits while federal officials examine health consequences to surrounding communities.

“Mountaintop removal coal mining destroys entire ecosystems and contaminates the water supplies in mining communities, making people sick and jeopardizing their safety,” said Congressman Yarmuth. “This legislation will provide families in these communities the answers they need and the protection they deserve. If it can’t be proven that mountaintop removal mining is safe, we shouldn’t allow it to continue.”

“Every American has a right to live and work in a community free from environmental health risks,” said Congresswoman Slaughter, a native of Harlan County, Ky. “And it is our duty to ensure that this right is not infringed upon by industries that consider community health and environmental protection to be less important than their profit margins. Given the growing field of evidence that people living near mountaintop removal coal mining sites are at an elevated risk for a range of major health problems, we should place a moratorium on further mountaintop coal removal activity until we can ensure the health and safety of families in these communities.”

In mountaintop removal mining operations, coal companies use heavy machinery and explosives to remove the upper levels of mountains to more easily access the coal seams beneath. They dispose of the waste in adjacent valleys. Mine waste pollution – including dangerous heavy metals such as selenium and sulfate – often contaminates or buries waterways in the valleys.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, mountaintop removal mining operations have buried or polluted nearly 2,000 miles of Appalachian streams. These are primary water sources for hundreds of families and entire communities.

“All the research points to what mountain people have known since mountaintop removal began: It is not possible to destroy our mountains without destroying ourselves,” said Bev May, a family nurse practitioner and resident of Floyd County, Ky. “It’s not possible to poison our streams without poisoning our children for untold generations to come. The research is not complete, but there’s more than enough research to justify an immediate moratorium on mountaintop removal.” Evidence is mounting that people living in communities near mountaintop removal coal mining sites are at an elevated risk for a range of major health problems. While there has long been anecdotal evidence to support this conclusion, recent peer-reviewed

research has examined the question more systematically and revealed compelling results.

One peer-reviewed study in Environmental Research found that communities near mountaintop removal mining sites showed elevated levels of birth defects – including circulatory and respiratory problems, and damage to the central nervous system, musculoskeletal and gastrointestinal systems – when compared with communities surrounding non-MTR mines. [\[Read the study here.\]](#)

Additionally, an analysis in the journal Science found that in communities near mountaintop removal coal mining sites, “adult hospitalizations for chronic pulmonary disorders and hypertension are elevated as a function of county-level coal production, as are rates of mortality; lung cancer; and chronic heart, lung, and kidney disease. Health problems are for women and men, so effects are not simply a result of direct occupational exposure of predominantly male coal miners.” [\[Read the study here.\]](#)

The first comprehensive scientific report on mountaintop removal mining was released in 2010 – more than three decades after the practice became legal.

Mountaintop removal mining is largely mechanized and requires far fewer miners than traditional underground mining. In Kentucky, the increase in mountaintop removal mining operations has coincided with a 60 percent decline in the number of miners – from 47,000 to approximately 18,000 – since the practice became legal 36 years ago, according to the Kentucky Office of Energy Policy.

[A copy of the legislation can be found here.](#)