

January 22, 2007  
KUFM / KGPR  
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### **Montana's Official Ambivalence on Coal Development**

Montana's Governor Brian Schweitzer has been an enthusiastic promoter of coal development in Montana. He has pushed for the development of synthetic fuel plants that would convert Montana coal to liquid fuels. He sees coal mining and the transformation of coal into other energy forms such as electricity, liquid, and gaseous fuels as one of the few ways to stabilize the population and economy of Eastern Montana. For those who have expressed doubts about expanded strip mining in Montana, Governor Schweitzer has dismissed their concerns arguing that strip mining is just a form of "deep farming" that, with reclamation, returns the land to productive agricultural uses.

Last week, however, Governor Schweitzer was up in arms over coal development and was urging the federal government to get involved in helping to block a coal mine.

The coal mine he opposes is in Canada, in the headwaters of the Flathead River in British Columbia, just north of Glacier Park in Western Montana. The coal mines he supports are in Montana to the east of the Rocky Mountains. In announcing his opposition to the Cline mine in British Columbia's Flathead Basin, the Governor was quoted as saying: "I'm a big supporter of developing our natural resources...but Colstrip, Montana, doesn't look anything like the North Fork" of the Flathead River.

This comment is likely to rub people in both British Columbia and Eastern Montana the wrong way. It suggests that Eastern Montana is an appropriate sacrificial

wasteland with few environmental resources that need to be protected. It also suggests that the coal mining activity that has been an important part of the economy of southeastern British Columbia, just north of Montana's border, for over a century was all a terrible mistake.

Of course there is a big difference between the two mine locations. The benefits from coal development in British Columbia will primarily be enjoyed by their government and citizens while Montana is likely to bear some serious environmental costs from those mining operations. The strip mining of coal in Eastern Montana, on the other hand, generates substantial revenues for Montana state and local governments and wages and profits for coal miners. Those financial benefits to Montanans apparently are sufficient to justify the environmental damage done by mining coal in Montana. It is not clear, however, how convincing this self-interested selective opposition to coal mining in British Columbia is likely to play north of the border.

The fact is that there is almost no environmentally benign way to mine and use coal. There is no such thing, so far in our history, as "clean coal." The Cline mine in the Canadian Flathead Basin, like other mines in the area, will literally tear a mountain apart in order to get at the coal. It involves a major rearrangement of the geology of the local landscape and will almost certainly have serious environmental consequences that will damage Montana's North Fork along Glacier National Park as well as our Flathead Valley and Flathead Lake.

But it is stretching the truth a bit to suggest that strip mining coal in Eastern Montana is an environmentally benign undertaking. We can pretend that we have tough reclamation laws that require quick reclamation of the disturbed lands back to their

original contours with native vegetation of similar productivity. But that was just the vision of the original reclamation law. It is not the reality on the ground. The vast majority of the land disturbed by coal strip mining in Montana, 83 percent of it, has yet to be reclaimed, and only 2 percent has been determined to be fully reclaimed. Our reclamation of those disturbed lands is still a hope and a promise. Meanwhile, the coal industry has been weakening the reclamation law so that the disturbed lands do not necessarily have to be returned to their original contours or re-vegetated with native plants to their previous productivity.

In addition, our strip mining also jumbles the underlying geology, removing the coal that previously served as an aquifer and replacing it with shattered fill material from which the ground water leaches all matter of materials, threatening the quality of the ground water.

The fact is, as a recent historical analysis of various mining developments documented, we always kid ourselves about how the next mine development will be much cleaner than all those dirty mining projects of the past. We are told we are going to deploy new technologies that make the mine a completely closed system with near zero effluents. The reality, time after time, is nothing of the sort. The reality is a serious mess usually requiring treatment indefinitely into the future to try to contain the environmental damage.

It is time to stop pretending. Coal mining is a dirty destructive business as Governor Schweitzer has to admit when he stares at mountain removal in the North Fork of the Flathead. Coal use is also a dirty destructive business as the coal liquefaction operations in South Africa prove and as the flood of dangerous effluents

from coal plants across the United States and around the world prove. We will not revitalize Eastern Montana around coal development any more that southeastern British Columbia will be revitalized by coal. Coal is not a magic silver bullet. It is a dirty dangerous substance the expanded use of which could make our planet unlivable in the not too distant future.