

## Appalachia's Last Stand

An Open Letter to West Virginia Citizens and the Congress of the United States:

On October 16 and 17, sixteen writers gathered in the heart of West Virginia to hear testimony and witness first hand the grievous effects of mountaintop removal. We learned these five devastating facts:

1. Toxic heavy metals—such as mercury, copper, arsenic, lead, and selenium—have been released into the water system which feeds the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. This injures not only local residents but threatens water systems all the way to the Gulf.
2. Dozens of dams (built from mining refuse to contain the toxic waste from mining and cleaning coal) are in danger of breaking. One holds over 3 billion (3,000,000,000) gallons of toxic sludge just 400 yards from Marsh Fork Elementary School. This sludge dam holds back *twenty times* as much toxic muck as the one at Buffalo Creek, whose rupture killed 125 people in 1972.
3. Coal companies have decapitated 474 mountains through the Appalachian region. Almost 1,000,000 acres of mountains have been leveled. West Virginia has lost 500,000 acres.
4. Every day in WV, three million (3,000,000) pounds of ammonium-nitrate and diesel fuel are used to blow up mountains. This also releases untold quantities of coal and silica dust into the air.
5. People's homes, property, and businesses have been damaged and destroyed as a direct result of mountaintop removal. In a single 2001 case, 1,500 homes were lost in a flood. The Federal court in Raleigh County, WV, has held the coal, landholding, and timber companies liable for this devastation.

In human terms what does this mean? This is what coal-field natives say:

- "This is not a story. These are our lives."
- "My children go to bed with their shoes on, so they can run in case of a flood."
- "I never imagined I'd sit on my front porch, watching the horizon disappear."
- "The first ones going to get it is our little children."
- "Where will our kids live, and our grandkids, and our children's grandkids?"
- "Our golden years have turned to black years."
- "We're prisoners in our own homes."
- "Greed is overcoming common sense."
- "Why should I sell my home, when they are breaking the law? No one should have to live like we are."
- "Why destroy our homes for 30 years' worth of energy? Why destroy our land, our air, our water?"
- "This is not an act of God; this is an act of greed."
- "You're bound every where you turn."
- "This is not only a coal-field thing; this is a global thing."
- "This is a war zone. Not only do we have to fight the companies, but we have to fight our cousins and neighbors."
- "A man shouldn't have to poison his neighbors to feed himself."

We do not blame individual miners for struggling to support their families. They, too, are being forced to participate in the demise of their own culture. But this systematic destruction cannot be allowed to continue. As a necessary first step, we call on the House of Representatives to pass the Clean Water Protection Act, H.R. 2719. This bill would enforce the original intention of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act by banning mining waste from use as fill material or being dumped in streams

The fight against mountaintop removal will continue in Appalachia, and ultimately the struggle for justice must extend beyond our borders. We call for the end of mountaintop removal, and we call on the United States Congress to take immediate action to save our children, our people, and our mountains.

From writers who live in West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio

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To learn more and become involved see [www.ohvec.org](http://www.ohvec.org), <http://webpages.charter.net/crmw>, and [www.ilovemountains.org](http://www.ilovemountains.org)