

Key Remarks of Jeremy Nichols, Climate and Energy Program Director for WildEarth Guardians

Gillette, WY Listening Session on Reforming the Federal Coal Program, August 13, 2015

We appreciate the Interior Department's willingness to engage in an honest conversation with the American public on how to reform the way our publicly owned coal is managed. It's not an easy conversation to have, but given the stakes it's one that we must embrace.

It's those stakes that I'd like to discuss today. And I'd like to start by acknowledging sentiment in today's room and say that we agree that the future of communities like Gillette and the jobs that coal mining provides needs to be of paramount consideration.

But we also have to be honest with ourselves that the future of coal is bleak. The reason is because of climate change. We can't keep mining and burning coal and have any chance of meaningfully reducing carbon emissions and combating climate change. The reality is, we have to move beyond coal and that means we have to keep it in the ground.

But that doesn't mean communities should be left in the lurch and that workers should be put on the street. That would be horrible if we, as a nation, allowed that to happen. That's why the Interior Department needs to step up and help lead communities to make a transition away from coal and toward more sustainable and prosperous economies.

Interior has the resources, the expertise, and, frankly, the moral duty to lead here.

I know that many don't like to hear this. The only thing I can say is that it's not going to get any easier. The costs of carbon emissions continue to rise, putting our economies everywhere at great risk. And with efforts to reduce carbon emissions gaining momentum, it's really not a matter of if, but when a transition away from coal is to happen.

I'll be totally honest, that we'd like to see it happen sooner rather than later. That does mean the federal coal program has to come to an end. But we need to be careful and deliberate as we make that happen.

That's why we've called on the Interior Department to adhere to five key milestones to ensure our coal is kept in the ground.

First, stop leasing more coal. Interior has more than 50 pending coal lease applications that it has the discretion to reject for public interest reasons.

Second, retire nonproducing leases. There are dozens of leases associated with mines that no longer exist or mines that have not produced for years. There's no reason to keep these leases on the books.

Third, recover carbon costs. We acknowledge that coal is going to be mined for many more years, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't ensure a fair return in the meantime. Interior must

move to recover, in some form, the costs of carbon emissions associated with the coal production it oversees.

Fourth, come clean with the American public. It's high time that the Interior Department prepared a programmatic environmental impact statement that analyzes and discloses the full scope of greenhouse gas emissions associated with federal coal management and the climate consequences. This transparency is critical to ensuring public and political understanding and support.

And fifth, Interior needs to help communities that dependent upon federal coal. As I said, we can't leave people hanging. Coal is going to go away, but that doesn't mean the Interior Department turns its back on this reality. Whether by ensuring adequate bonds to assure reclamation jobs or ensuring communities receive financial support for economic planning, Interior can and must play a leading role.

By heeding these five milestones Sally Jewell can ensure companies producing from existing leases will be able to continue mining, jobs and communities will stay intact, our electricity supply will not be disrupted, and carbon emissions linked to publicly owned coal will be meaningfully reduced.

Finally, I'll add that we're not here because of royalties. On this point, I agree with the coal industry that we're really here to discuss the future of the federal coal program. Where we disagree is what the future holds.

It's clear that our coal needs to be kept in the ground. Interior needs to honestly acknowledge this reality and reform our coal program accordingly. Thank you.