

Colorado coal miners fear losing jobs if access to federal lands curbed

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SOMERSET — Two miles deep in their latest tunnel, coal miner Steve Baker and his cohorts barely blink at underground hazards: a cavern collapsing behind them, explosive gas around their boots, roiling clouds of black dust.

But they dread the above-ground parrying of state and federal politicians over protection of the nation's forests. Decisions expected soon by Gov. Bill Ritter and the Obama administration may threaten the miners' livelihoods — and the future of a traditional industry in western Colorado.

Once, the miners relied on bore holes drilled from the forest above to vent the explosive methane. Today, new holes are prohibited — because holes require temporary roads through forests where roads

Belt operator Seth Russell, 23, of Paonia, Co., works on fixing an air hose, deep under ground, in the Oxbox Coal Mine in Somerset Colorado. (RJ Sangosti | The Denver Post) have been banned.

Now, access to half their coal reserves is hung up, jeopardizing 1,000 jobs in this valley and survival of a half-dozen towns.

"You can't lock up the country and expect us to have jobs and businesses!" Baker said. "What are we going to do? We all going to sit home, draw unemployment? Be on the dole?"

The 353 miners employed in Oxbow Mining's Elk Creek mine, and 700 at neighboring coal mines, could become collateral damage in the debate in Denver and Washington, D.C., over how to manage 58.4 million acres of national forest land. The land was designated for protection as "roadless" in 2001, when President Bill Clinton ordered a moratorium on new road-building in an effort to keep the last wild forests pristine.

Ritter is considering whether to forward to the federal government an alternative state plan for the 4.1 million national forest acres in Colorado — a plan that would make an exception for coal mining and for ski areas and towns threatened by wildfire that want to remove beetle-killed trees.

The state plan would remove protection from 457,000 acres the federal government wants to keep roadless, including land around these mines that already has roads on it, but provide protection for 410,000 acres in forests that the federal government initially was not proposing to include under the roadless designation.

National conservation groups — boosted by a 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruling — demand strict adherence to the 2001 Clinton rule. Now, Ritter must decide whether to push the state plan — and miners' interests — as U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack moves toward a comprehensive national approach.

"I hope (Ritter) decides soon. Hope he does what's best for the working man," said John Ormsbee, 43, ankle-deep in mud as he ran a machine churning coal in an underground cavern.

Federal courts may determine the extent to which states, or the federal government, can drive protection of forests. The 10th Circuit Court of Appeals — facing arguments by the Colorado Mining Association and conservation groups — is poised to settle a challenge to a federal court decision that overturned the 2001 ban.

Leaders of conservation groups last week expressed little sympathy for miners.

"When you're talking about jobs in Colorado and the West, it's not just about logging or mining or drilling anymore," said Jane Danowitz, director of the public lands program for the Pew Environment Group.

Danowitz called the plan that Ritter is considering "shortsighted." It would open pristine backcountry to "industrial development," while "increasingly, Colorado's financial well-being is driven by activities tied directly to protected landscapes."

She cited outdoor recreation that she said supports about 100,000 jobs and contributes \$10 billion a year to Colorado's economy.

Still, few jobs in the Somerset-Delta-Paonia area match mining's \$28-an-hour wages.

Scores of miners sent letters to Ritter seeking support. Conservationists, equally fervent, sent tens of thousands more.

The miners, and Oxbow Mining president James Cooper, worry that if temporary roads for de-gassing boreholes are banned, mining must end.

U.S. Rep. John Salazar, D-Colo., is backing miners, pressing state and federal officials for decisions on proposals to drill new 8-inch-diameter holes "critical for safety."

If coal mines close, "I'd have to move away," said Tracy Pagone, a fourth-generation miner along with two brothers. "It's our life. . . . They get roadless rules, we're done."

Three miners sipping Stop 'N Save coffee before their shift recently contemplated the possibility of layoffs.

"This is all I've done," said Tommy Garcia, 33, a father of three who pays \$1,200 a month on his mortgage. "With a family, benefits are huge, and the mine pays our benefits."

Battling the black dust with a water hose, Baker, 50, recalled how government invocation of eminent domain in the 1970s uprooted his father, a cattleman southwest of Denver. The family moved.

Baker found work as a logger, until federal restrictions kicked in. He turned to mining.

"I lost one profession. I see it coming for this one," Baker said. "What are these 'green jobs' going to be? Monitoring our locked-up areas? Standing in little guard shacks so nobody drives through? What are we all going to do if they keep shutting us down?"