

Four Scientists Testify to Congress on Health Effects of Mountaintop Removal

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New Science in Mountaintop Removal: Community Health, Birth Defects, and the Latest on Threats to Water Quality

Washington, DC — Today Sens. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) and Benjamin Cardin (D-MD) and Rep. Ed Markey (D-MA) hosted four leading scientists for Senate and House briefings on the environmental and health impacts of destructive mountaintop removal (MTR) mining in Appalachia.

The scientists - Dr. Margaret Palmer of the University of Maryland, Dr. Emily Bernhardt of Duke University, Dr. Michael Hendryx of West Virginia University, and Dr. Melissa Ahern of Washington State University - presented a range and depth of peer-reviewed scientific studies and data that show severe water degradation and community health problems in mountaintop removal mining areas. Palmer opened by giving attendees an overview of MTR.

Bernhardt shared the cumulative impacts of MTR on an Appalachian watershed: complete ecosystem losses; biological (e.g., decreases in organism diversity); hydrological (e.g., increases in flooding, disruptions in groundwater flow paths, water contamination). She also stated that 1385 square miles of forests have been converted to mines and 2400 miles of streams have been buried. When talking about land change, Bernhardt explained that mining has affected 6% of the land versus development, having only changed 3.5%. "A poor stream condition index is a strong predictor of worse human health," said Bernhardt.

Hendryx shared the findings from air, water, and soil sampling in areas where people are living in Appalachia. He's found that silica and other elements are in high presence in the air. Preliminary laboratory tests, using air samples from areas where people are living in Appalachia, show mountaintop removal mining dust kills heart cells and impairs vascular function. Hendryx has also begun studying the diesel contaminant health impact in MTR environments.

Ahern has found that mortality rates in KY, TN, VA, and WV have increased in MTR regions. From 1999 to 2005, there were 4,432 "excess deaths" in Appalachia. It has also been found that babies born to mothers who live in areas with mountain top removal mining have a 26% higher rate of birth defects. That compares to babies born to mothers who smoke during pregnancy who only have an 18% higher risk of birth defects.

The following is a statement from Vernon Haltom, member of the Appalachian Community Health Emergency (ACHE) Campaign:

"We want to thank Sens. Boxer and Cardin and Rep. Markey for recognizing science, which is showing that mountaintop removal mining is inflicting tragic costs and sickness on Appalachian communities, and working to educate their colleagues in Congress on this emergency in Appalachia.

"Our communities in Appalachia are facing an emergency of life-threatening health problems because of the severe destruction and pollution of mountaintop removal mining.

"As our neighbors, children, and family members get sick and fight cancer, sometimes tragically losing that battle, most of our elected leaders are turning a blind eye to true cost of mountaintop removal mining and coal. We're paying that cost with our lives and well-being in Appalachia.

"We need more leaders like Sens. Boxer and Cardin and Rep. Markey. And we need leaders in Congress to work together to protect Appalachian communities by ending mountaintop removal mining immediately."

Appalachian Community Health Emergency (ACHE) is a nonprofit campaign that seeks to educate others about the birth defects and diseases affecting individuals living in areas with mountain top removal.