

Ruling Stops Colorado Coal Mine Expansion Threatening Climate, National Forest

Judge Orders Trump Administration to Weigh Methane Limits, Stream Contamination

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Global Research, November 13, 2019

[Center for Biological Diversity](#) 8 November 2019

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Oil and Energy](#)

A federal judge blocked the 2,000-acre expansion of a coal mine in the wildlands of Colorado's Gunnison National Forest today, ordering the Trump administration to consider limiting methane emissions and address potential harm to water and fish.

In today's [ruling](#) U.S. District Judge R. Brooke Jackson said the Interior Department violated federal law by failing to consider an alternative that would require flaring methane, a potent greenhouse gas, and by ignoring new information about the potential effects to perennial streams in the project area. The mining plan approved 8.4 miles of new roads and 43 new methane venting wells, anticipated to release almost 12 million tons of methane into the atmosphere.

"Only a remedy that prevents new mining in the expansion area will avoid subjecting conservation groups' valid objections to the 'bureaucratic steamroller,' " Jackson wrote.

In July five conservation groups [sued](#) the Trump administration and asked the court to block approval of Arch Coal's West Elk mine expansion, which would invade roadless areas of western Colorado's Gunnison National Forest.

"This ruling is a major victory for Colorado's climate, clean energy, and public lands, said Jeremy Nichols, climate and energy program director at WildEarth Guardians. "More importantly, it's a resounding rebuke of the Trump administration's attempts to sidestep our environmental laws to appease the coal industry."

The previous environmental analysis for the coal leases said flaring would be considered at a later stage and, the judge said, lacked rigorous evaluation of the alternative and was rather a "mere kicking the can down the road," requiring the Interior Department to undertake this analysis at the mine-planning stage.

"Today's decision validates over a decade's worth of advocacy on behalf of the Sunset Roadless Area's irreplaceable wildlife and habitat," said Matt Reed, public lands director at High Country Conservation Advocates. "It also validates the decision to challenge climate change pollution head-on. As the largest

source of industrial methane pollution in Colorado, the West Elk coal mine has long treated our public lands and air with impunity. The court's decision halts the mine expansion, including further road-building and well-drilling in pristine roadless forest in Gunnison County, and High Country Conservation Advocates will continue to battle this expansion every step of the way."

Located in the iconic West Elk Mountains just east of the town of Paonia, the West Elk mine is one of the largest coal mines in Colorado. It covers more than 20 square miles of the Gunnison National Forest next to the West Elk Wilderness Area.

"Methane pollution is a climate-killer, and we hope this decision will spell the end of unlimited emissions from this coal mine," said Allison Melton, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. "The West Elk expansion threatens to derail Colorado's transition to clean, renewable energy. We'll continue to fight the Trump administration's destructive policies and projects."

The West Elk mine is the single-largest industrial source of methane pollution in Colorado. In 2017 it released more than 440,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide, equal to the annual emissions from more than 98,000 cars.

"It is ridiculous for agencies to rubber stamp this damaging fossil fuel development in a spectacular roadless area, especially without considering impacts to streams or alternative plans that would reduce climate pollution," said Peter Hart at Wilderness Workshop. "The case highlights how damaging our fossil fuel addiction is to public lands and to our shared climate. The court was right to demand that the agency take a harder look at protecting such important public resources."

In March the Interior Department approved the 2,000-acre expansion, allowing Arch Coal to mine nearly 18 million tons of new coal over three years in the Sunset Roadless Area, an undeveloped tract of the Gunnison National Forest.

"Today's decision to protect our public lands is a victory for all Colorado communities who are struggling with the harmful impacts of a changing climate," said Jim Alexeee, director of the Colorado Sierra Club. "Our lands belong to all of us — not billionaire coal executives. Sierra Club will continue to fight for our lands and our climate, and to keep fossil fuels where they belong: in the ground."

"We're pleased that the federal government's practice of rubber-stamping new coal development regardless of its impacts on special places like the Sunset Roadless area has been stopped in its tracks," said Daniel Timmons, WildEarth Guardians' staff attorney who represented Guardians in the case. "This decision is a victory for everyone who values public lands and a healthy climate."

The conservation groups are also challenging the federal coal leases before the U.S. Court of Appeals.

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