

For Immediate Release

May 16, 2024

Contacts:

Perry Wheeler, Earthjustice, 202-792-6211, pwheeler@earthjustice.org

Shannon Anderson, Powder River Basin Resource Council, 307-763-0995, sanderson@powderriverbasin.org

Erik Schlenker-Goodrich, Western Environmental Law Center, 575-751-0351, eriksg@westernlaw.org

Noah Rott, Sierra Club, 406-214-1990, noah.rott@sierraclub.org

Jeremy Nichols, Center for Biological Diversity, 303-437-7663, jnichols@biologicaldiversity.org

Biden Administration to End Coal Leasing in Powder River Basin

BLM decision will keep nearly 6 billion tons of highly polluting coal in the ground

Gillette, WY – The Biden administration [announced today](#) that it will end coal leasing in the Powder River Basin – the largest coal-producing region in the United States. The decision represents an historic shift in federal management of coal in the region, recognizing that the market has shifted away from coal as an electricity source as states and energy-consuming companies seek out cleaner and more affordable energy sources.

The Bureau of Land Management released a final environmental impact statement for two Powder River Basin resource management plans ([here](#) and [here](#)), finding that there would be significant impacts to our climate, human health, and the environment from continuing to lease the region's coal. BLM selected a "no future coal leasing alternative," through which existing mines can develop already-leased reserves but cannot expand with publicly-owned coal reserves.

"Coal has powered our nation for many decades, but technology, economics and markets are changing radically. BLM's announcement recognizes that coal's era is ending, and it's time to focus on supporting our communities through the transition away from coal, investing in workers, and moving to heal our lands, waters and climate as we enter a bright clean energy future," said **Paula Antoine, Western Organization of Resource Councils Board Chair, from Winner, South Dakota.**

"As someone who lives near some of the largest coal mines in the nation, I'm thankful for the leadership from the BLM in finally addressing the long-standing negative impacts that federal coal leasing has had on the Powder River Basin," said **Lynne Huskinson,**

retired coal miner and board member of Powder River Basin Resource Council and Western Organization of Resource Councils from Gillette, WY. “For decades, mining has affected public health, our local land, air, and water, and the global climate. We look forward to BLM working with state and local partners to ensure a just economic transition for the Powder River Basin as we move toward a clean energy future.”

“The BLM released a common sense plan that reflects the reality of today’s coal markets,” **said Mark Fix, a Miles City, MT rancher and member of Northern Plains Resource Council.** “Coal companies in this region already have decades of coal locked up in leases, and it’s hard to imagine they’ll find buyers that far into the future given the competition from more affordable energy sources. This plan protects taxpayers from wasting publicly-owned resources on lowball leases to subsidize an industry in decline. It’s time we take a clear-eyed look at the future and start investing in a transition away from coal.”

In 2022, in response to a challenge from conservation groups, a federal judge [found that the two resource management plans failed to address the public health consequences](#) of allowing massive amounts of coal, oil, and gas production from public lands and minerals in the Powder River Basin, including approximately 6 billion tons of low-grade, highly polluting coal over 20 years. The court ordered BLM to redo its environmental analysis.

In the ruling, U.S. District Judge Brian Morris found that BLM failed to comply with a previous court order directing the agency to account for the environmental and human health impacts of burning publicly owned coal. The judge also held that BLM failed to consider alternatives that would limit or end new coal leasing in the Powder River Basin in violation of the National Environmental Policy Act.

“People, businesses, and entire industries are feeling the effects of the climate crisis now and are overwhelmingly supportive of renewable energy as a cleaner, cheaper alternative to fossil fuels,” **said David Merrill, senior field organizer at Montana Sierra Club.** “This will signal a major turning point where the public’s best interest – and what’s best for our collective future – is at the heart of land-use decisions instead of a status quo where public lands are sold off to the highest bidder.”

The Powder River Basin is the largest single-source of carbon dioxide pollution in the nation, with almost all of the coal mined in the region used for electricity production. More than 43% of all coal produced in the U.S., and more than 85% of all federal coal produced in the U.S., comes from the Powder River Basin, which stretches more than 13 million acres across Montana and Wyoming. Coal production [has already fallen sharply this year](#) following a mild winter and increased competition from other energy

sources, and has been on a downward trajectory since peak regional production in 2008. The BLM's decision follows numerous company bankruptcies and coal mine closure announcements, and currently only a handful of coal lease applications are pending in the region – all of which have been delayed for years based on company requests.

“This is a monumental decision that will save lives, safeguard our environment, and significantly cut carbon emissions in the United States,” said **Drew Caputo, vice president of litigation for lands, wildlife, and oceans at Earthjustice**. “For years, conservation groups have litigated to get to this point – arguing that the federal government cannot simply lease away our public lands to coal companies while ignoring the impacts to public health. We are grateful that the Biden administration has shown the courage to end coal leasing in the Powder River Basin and at long last turn the page on this climate-destroying fuel.”

“This decision opens new doors to a future where our public lands are not sacrificed for fossil fuel profits and, instead, can prove a bulwark of ecological and community resilience in the face of a warming climate,” said **Erik Schlenker-Goodrich, executive director of the Western Environmental Law Center**. “We are so pleased to see the Biden administration take this critical step in our shared fight to protect public lands and the climate. And remember: this step that would not have been possible without the persistent, decades-long hard work of our Wyoming partner groups.”

“This is what true leadership on climate and energy looks like,” said **Jeremy Nichols, senior advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity**. “I applaud the Interior Department in recognizing we shouldn't be saddled with more costly coal but instead empowered with clean, affordable energy that safeguards our climate for future generations.”

“The BLM's decision to end coal leasing is a sea change in the transition to clean energy,” stated **Derf Johnson, deputy director of the Montana Environmental Information Center**. “As we wind down the coal mining in the PRB, there is an immense opportunity to continue growing the clean energy economy.”

Attorneys from Earthjustice, the Western Environmental Law Center, and Sierra Club represented the Western Organization of Resource Councils, Montana Environmental Information Center, Powder River Basin Resource Council, Northern Plains Resource Council, Center for Biological Diversity, WildEarth Guardians, and Sierra Club in the legal challenge.