

Then They Wrote it All Down as the Progress of Man

In 1971, American singer-songwriter John Prine made his debut in folk and country music, with a self-titled album with the song *Paradise*. Widely covered and deservedly praised, the bluegrass tune was written in dedication to Prine's father and recounts a painful history from his hometown in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, where strip mining for coal devastated the surrounding environment and community.

The county is within the Appalachian Mountains, North America's oldest mountain range. Compared to the striking, jagged peaks of the Rockies, these mountains are a series of densely forested and time-worn ridges and valleys. They also contain major coal deposits. The storied history of mountaintop removals and open-pit coal mines in Appalachia has been directly linked to higher rates of environmental pollution, illness, poverty, and mortality borne by nearby communities and people for centuries. As mountainous elders on our landscape, I can't help but hear their precautionary tale reverberate through Prine's song; a clear and explicit warning to their younger Rocky Mountain relatives.

Coal has a shorter, although similarly controversial history in Alberta. Long our main energy source, in 2015 the government committed to phasing out all coal power generation by 2030. We are on track to meet that target six years early. While the province no longer intends to burn the high-emission fuel,

the 2020 removal of the 1976 *Coal Policy* indicated the government's intention to expand the areas available along the Rockies' Eastern Slopes to mine coal. Met with immediate and widespread public outcry, the years that followed held many hard-fought battles and extensive consultations, and ultimately produced the moratorium on coal we have today:

"Albertans expect coal exploration and development in the Eastern Slopes to remain suspended until such time as sufficient land use clarity has been provided through a planning activity ... No exploration or commercial development activities related to coal will be permitted"

— *Ministerial Order 002/2022*

Unsurprisingly, it came with exceptions. Four "advanced projects" were allowed to continue through the regulatory process including: Benga Mining Ltd.'s Grassy Mountain Coal Mine, Montem Resources Tent Mountain Mine, Coalspur's Vista Mine Expansion, and Summit Coal Inc.'s Mine 14.

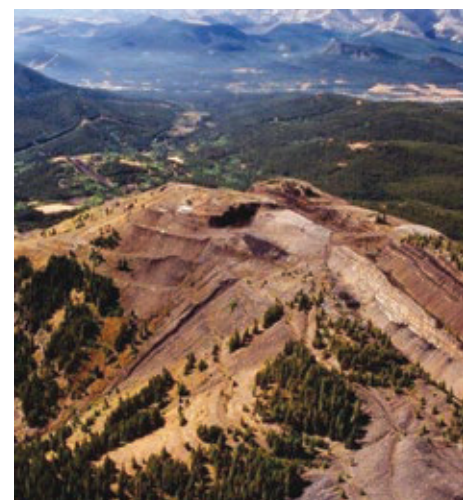
For a time, three out of these four had been outright rejected or effectively stalled. A joint review of Grassy Mountain by Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) and the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) deemed the project unfit to continue and "not in the public interest." Appeals by Benga were rejected by top courts. Following their defeat and likely smelling blood in the water, nearby Montem Resources quickly retracted their coal application and is now attempting to pivot plans to become a renewable energy complex. Vista Coal Mine progresses slowly, currently caught up in court over a federal impact assessment. Summit Coal Inc. was the last company standing.

In late July of this year, the company submitted applications to AER under the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* and *Water Act*, for the purposes of coal mining at its Mine 14 site, northeast of Grande Cache.

AWA prepared a detailed statement of concern (SOC) in response, requesting AER to deny the application on economic, environmental, and societal grounds.

That should have been the end of coal applications, at least until the completion of necessary subregional management plans under the Alberta Land Stewardship Act, as dictated by the ministerial order. But apparently the interest of millions of Albertans doesn't quite measure up to the ego of one snubbed billionaire (Duh Kennedy! Billion > million). Since August, the Alberta Lobby Registry's records show the provincial government has been intensely lobbied by allies of Gina Reinhart, Australia's richest person and majority owner of Hancock Prospecting, Benga's parent company. So, when Benga rebranded to Northback Holdings and submitted a new application for an exploratory drilling permit on Grassy Mountain, I concede I should have interpreted the ministerial order in the strangest, least sensible way possible and not been surprised that the AER accepted it for review.

This is all to say, you may have noticed AWA's been busy over the last few



Aerial view of Grassy Mountain in 2010. Considering the state of regrowth multiple decades after this area last saw mining, the scars should be heeded as a warning; there's no rebuilding a mountain.

Photo © AWA.

months raising our environmental concerns over various mining projects through the province's regulatory processes, and we have some updates.

At the start of November, we submitted another statement of concern over CST Canada Coal Ltd.'s application to extend the depth of their coal mine near Grande Cache. In the last year, the company's mining operations had three incidents involving the release of waste into the environment. CST became the subject of two ongoing, unresolved investigations; one for allegedly failing to immediately report a release of a substance and another for not complying with an AER term or condition.

Shortly following our submission, another incident occurred; due to wall instabilities, one worker and the excavator they were using became partially buried by falling rubble in CST's mine. While they thankfully walked away unharmed, CST should have to demonstrate they have new

standard operating procedures in place that address the root cause of these incidents and prevent their occurrence in the future. For these reasons and more, AWA requested AER complete the outstanding investigations of CST Canada Coal Ltd.'s operations and management before reviewing the company's application and carefully consider whether approval of any further coal development in the province is in the public's best interest and compliant with their mandate.

Speaking of AER, they have yet to address our SOC's on Summit Coal's Mine 14 development project and Northback Holding's Grassy Mountain exploration project. We did however get two different but equally disappointing letters from the companies involved; Summit challenged everyone's participation in the process, apart from Aseniwuche Winewak Nation, who AER insists have been sufficiently consulted with and should be bound by their previous support for the project, which

was given all the way back in 2009. Northback largely argued that every concern raised by AWA was outside of their project's scope, and that they have many signatories on a local petition of support for their coal exploration project. Note that the exploration phase of mining development is not the profitable stage and can result in significant damage to the environment and reclamation liabilities.

The logging required to make access roads fragments habitat and exposes the shallow montane soils to erosion and colonization by invasive species. Exploratory roads become sources of sediment, washing downstream rivers and creeks during precipitation events, negatively impacting aquatic habitat and watershed health. Considering insurers are becoming increasingly hesitant to fund coal companies and Grassy Mountain has repeatedly been deemed inappropriate for actual coal development, it is unclear how Northback intends to recoup costs.

It is encouraging to know AWA has not been alone in any of this; our statements have been joined by many other citizens, communities, organizations, and towns concerned about the ramifications of more coal mining in our mountains. You can support this effort by writing to your government representatives and letting them know your thoughts on the continued coal exploration and development in the province. A template can be found on our website. As we wait for the regulatory bodies to make decisions and provide some clarity, I am once again reminded of Prine's evergreen warning:

***Then the coal company came
with the world's largest shovel
And they tortured the timber
and stripped all the land
Well, they dug for their coal till
the land was forsaken
Then they wrote it all down as
the progress of man.***

- Kennedy Halvorson



Cartoon by Sandra Mills