

CHUITNA CITIZENS ~~COAL~~ ITION

PRESS RELEASE

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CITIZENS PETITION STATE TO DECLARE CHUITNA WATERSHED “UNSUITABLE” FOR COAL STRIP MINING

First-ever use of state law to protect Alaskans from massive strip mine impacts

ANCHORAGE, AK – Local citizens and conservation groups today filed a legal petition requesting the Alaska Department of Natural Resources to designate all lands within the Chuitna River watershed, on the western shore of Cook Inlet, as unsuitable for surface coal mining. A Delaware corporation, PacRim Coal, plans to develop the Chuitna coal strip mine, which threatens to destroy over 30 square miles of intact fish and game habitat, including tributaries of the salmon-rich Chuitna River. Additional adjacent leases in the area could bring the total disturbed area to over 55 square miles. Because the complex wetlands and salmon stream hydrology in the region make mining and post-mining reclamation virtually impossible, local citizens and groups have asked DNR to recognize the region as unsuitable for intensive strip mining activity.

“This isn’t the Usibelli coal mine or some other upland coal mine where conditions are relatively dry,” said Judy Heilman, spokesperson for the Chuitna Citizens No-Coal Coalition. “The wetlands and streams of the Chuitna area represent a unique and complex system that supports our salmon and our Alaskan way of life. DNR cannot pretend these habitats can simply be replaced once the mining corporation takes what it wants.”

Under the Alaska Surface Coal Mining Control and Reclamation Act (ASCMCRA), DNR must designate an area unsuitable for coal mining if reclamation is not technologically

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feasible in the area. DNR may designate an area as unsuitable for mining if the strip mining will damage aquifers, natural systems, and aesthetic values, among other things.

“Once you strip the wetlands and overburden to remove the coal from as deep as 300 feet, the aquifers and natural water flows will be massively altered along with the salmon habitat they support,” said attorney Becca Bernard with Trustees for Alaska. “DNR must recognize there is no feasible technology to return the land to pre-mining conditions - especially here in Alaska’s unique cold and wet weather ecosystem - as required by state and federal law.”

As energy prices remain relatively high, coal development is receiving increased attention in Alaska, which possesses roughly half the nation’s coal reserves. According to PacRim Coal officials, Chuitna coal would largely supply Asian markets. Earlier this year, Governor Palin announced – for the first time ever – elevated mercury levels in Alaska fish, and coal-fired power plants in Asian and Russia are likely mercury sources.

“Why would we destroy salmon streams in Alaska with a massive coal mine, then set ourselves up for more mercury in our fish when old Asian power plants burn this coal?” said set net fisherman Terry Jorgenson. “I sell my fish because they are fresh, clean and wild Alaska salmon, and a massive coal mine will destroy our marketing advantage over farmed fish.”

The Chuitna River watershed supports all five species of pacific salmon, and provides essential habitat for bear, moose, and other fish and game. It has already been identified as one of the nation’s ten “Most Endangered Rivers” for 2007 due to the imminent threat of coal strip mining in the area. The region provides important subsistence, commercial and recreational fishing and hunting opportunities that support Alaskan families and their way of life.

“If we don’t recognize this unique and fragile area as unsuitable for coal strip mining, no place in Alaska will be safe,” said Heilman.

Local citizens and groups have tried in vain to gain access to closed-door meetings between state and federal regulatory agencies and PacRim Coal and its consultants. A response to a recent Freedom of Information Act request shows regular meetings, teleconferences and document exchanges between the agencies and the developers. Local citizens have contacted Governor Palin repeatedly for an open-door permitting process.

The Chuitna Citizens NO-COALition is an alliance of local residents and property owners concerned about the impacts from the proposed Chuitna coal strip mine. Trustees for Alaska is a nonprofit public interest law firm providing legal counsel to protect and sustain Alaska's natural environment. A copy of the Unsuitable Lands Petition is available at: www.trustees.org or www.inletkeeper.org