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Interior Secretary Cecil D. Andrus said today he has approved, with some modifications, the mining and reclamation plan by Westmoreland Resources to strip mine Crow Indian and state-owned coal from nearly 2,000 acres in Crow Indian Ceded Lands in south-central Montana.

Westmoreland proposed to expand its existing Absaloka Coal Mine by 1,958 acres (792 hectares) in northern Big Horn County just north of the Crow Indian Reservation. The company would remove 190.6 million tons (172.9 million metric tons) of coal over the next 20 years from the expansion area and the remaining 193 unmined acres (78 hectares) of the existing Absaloka Mine area. The Secretary's approval was given following Consultation with Crow tribal leaders.

In approving the Westmoreland proposal, Andrus stipulated that "in addition to specific requirements of existing federal, state, tribal and local laws as applicable, the (U.S. Geological Survey's) area mining supervisor may at any time require reasonable modification of any phase of the approved mining and reclamation plan where he determines it is necessary or desirable for efficient or environmentally sound mining operations."

The Interior Secretary also stipulated that "Westmoreland Resources will monitor on a continuous basis the quantity and the quality of ground and surface water in the area adjacent to the mining area to determine the impact on Sarpy Creek and the hydrology of East Sarpy Basin."

The area to be mined under the plan is part of a 1.1-million-acre (445,000-hectare) tract ceded to the U.S. Government by the Crow Tribe under a 1904 act of Congress. Legislation approved in 1958 restored surface or mineral rights, or both, on parts of the Ceded Area to the Crow Tribe. The tribe now owns coal rights on about 150,000 acres (60,700 hectares) in the Ceded Area, and these rights are held in trust for the tribe and administered by the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

Westmoreland owns surface rights and the Crow Indian Tribe the coal rights on 1,644 acres (655 hectares) of the proposed expansion area of the Absaloka Mine. The State of Montana owns both the surface and coal rights on the remaining 314 acres (127 hectares) encompassed by the mining proposal and has leased the coal to Westmoreland. The expansion area is mostly to the east and southeast of the existing mine, which is about 26 miles (42 kilometers) east of Hardin, Mont., and 30 miles (48 kilometers) south of Hysham, Mont.

Westmoreland Resources obtained coal leases from the Crow Tribe in 1972 on 30,876 acres (12,500 hectares) in the Ceded Area, and began operating the Absaloka Mine in 1974 under an approved plan for surface mining 410 acres (166 hectares). This plan was covered in an environmental impact statement prepared by the BIA and filed with the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) in 1974. Subsequent Federal Court orders held that Interior's approval of the Westmoreland leases to mine tribal coal was a "major federal action" that required a comprehensive environmental impact statement as well as individual impact statements for each subsequent mining plan on the lease areas.

The BIA filed with the CEQ on Dec. 15, 1976, a final impact statement on the leases, and the Interior

Department approved the leases Jan. 19, 1977. The U.S. Geological Survey filed a final environmental impact statement on the Absaloka Mine expansion proposal with the CEQ May 31, 1977. Andrus considered that statement, as well as written comments and oral comments received at a public hearing Dec. 1, 1976, before deciding to permit Westmoreland to proceed with a modified mining plan.

The Absaloka Mine produced 4 million tons (3.6 million metric tons) of coal in 1976, and production from the existing mine and the expansion area is expected to peak at 10 million tons (9 million metric tons) a year from 1981 through 1995. Westmoreland currently is committed to provide 5 million tons (4.5 million metric tons) of coal per year from the mine for electric power generation in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa.

Crow Indians have preferential employment rights in the Westmoreland mining operations involving coal owned by the tribe. The Absaloka Mine now employs 110 workers, of which about 60 are Indians. Employment is expected to rise to 210 when full production is reached in 1981, of which 167 are expected to be Indians. The mine payroll, currently more than $2.8 million a year, is expected to reach more than $3.9 million annually by 1981.

Royalty payments to the Crow Tribe are expected to increase from the present $1.5 million a year up to an average $7.5 million a year from 1982 to 1997. The State of Montana is expected to receive more than $21 million a year in severance and resource indemnity taxes a year after 1982. Big Horn County also will receive considerable benefits, with revenues from proceeds and property taxes expected to reach $7 million a year by 1982.

Approximately 785 acres (318 hectares) of the proposed mining area was or is cultivated and 1,365 acres (552 hectares) used for grazing. Westmoreland said it plans to offer the surface lands for purchase to the Crow Tribe after the land is mined and reclaimed, although the reclaimed land is not expected to be suitable for agricultural production or sustained grazing for approximately seven years after mining. In addition, because the two major coal beds that will be mined average as much as 35 feet thick, the reclaimed land surface will be considerably lower than it was originally.

A summary included with the final environmental impact statement also listed the other following environmental impacts of the Westmoreland mining plan:

- The existing land surface, vegetation and all aquifers above the base of the Robinson Coal bed in the proposed mine area will be destroyed.
- Wildlife habitats will be disrupted until disturbed areas are revegetated and human intrusions terminated.
- Ground and surface water quantity and quality, livestock grazing, Oceanic views and open space qualities will be degraded and restricted until revegetation is successfully completed.
- Dust and noise will be increased locally until recontouring and revegetation is successfully completed.
- Livestock and wildlife forage will be reduced until revegetation is successful.
- Employment for the Crow Indians and other citizens of Big Horn County will be increased.
- Tax and royalty income for the Crow Tribe, the State of Montana and Big Horn County will be increased.