Media Contact: Don Finley (703) 860-7444
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A final environmental impact statement on a proposal to mine Crow Indian and state-owned coal from nearly 2,000 acres in south-central Montana has been prepared by the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, and filed with the Council on Environmental Quality.

The statement discusses the environmental effects of a proposed expansion of Westmoreland Resources' existing Absaloka Coal Mine by 1,958 acres (792 hectares) in Crow Indian Ceded Lands in northern Big Horn County just north of the Crow Indian Reservation.

The 1.1 million acre (445,000 hectare) Crow Ceded Area was ceded to the U.S. Government by the Crow Tribe under a, 1904 act of Congress. Indians then living in the area were either allotted their land or reimbursed for it if they moved south to the Crow Indian Reservation. The land not allotted to Indians was opened to the general public for settlement, but the Federal Government retained coal and other mineral rights. In 1958, Congress restored to tribal ownership all of the vacant and undisposed ceded land, and mineral rights on these lands as well as on settled land were restored to the Crow Tribe.

The Crow 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 proposed to surface mine 190.6 million tons (172.9 million metric tons) of coal by 1997 from the proposed expansion area and 193 acres in the existing Absaloka Mine area, with a peak production of 10 million tons (9 million metric tons) per year from 1981 through 1995. Westmoreland owns surface rights and the Crow Indian Tribe the coal rights on 1,644 acres (665 hectares) of the expansion area and the State of Montana owns both the surface and coal rights on the remaining 314 acres (127 hectares).

The Absaloka Mine is about 26 miles (42 kilometers) east of Hardin, Mont., and 30 miles (48 kilometers) south of Hysham, Mont., in the drainage area of Sarpy Creek. The proposed expansion area is mostly to the east and southeast of the existing mine.

Westmoreland proposed to reclaim and revegetate the mined areas concurrently as mining activities proceed with a maximum of 110.5 acres (44.7 hectares) being disturbed each year.

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 of 410 acres (166 hectares). This plan was covered in an environmental impact statement prepared by the BIA and filed with the CEQ in 1974. Subsequent Federal Court orders required the Interior Department to prepare a comprehensive environmental impact statement on the leasing of the Ceded Lands as well as separate environmental impact statements on each mining plan for tracts within those lease areas.

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

Secretary Thomas S. Kleppe approved the leases Jan. 19, 1977. The Absaloka Mine produced 4 million tons (3.6 million metric tons) of coal in 1976, and the coal in the approved mine area is expected to be exhausted in 1977. Westmoreland currently is committed to provide 5 million tons (4.5 million metric tons) of coal per year for electric power generation in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa.

Two major coal beds and two smaller beds would be surface mined by Westmoreland. The Rosebud-McKay coal bed is 30 to 35 feet (9.1 to 10.7 meters) thick and the top of the bed is from 70 to 135 feet (21.3 to 41.1 meters) below the land surface. The Robinson bed ranges from 17 to 23 feet (5.2 to 7 meters) in thickness and is from 150 to 270 feet (45.7 to 82.3 meters) below the surface. One of the small beds lies 20 to 30 feet (6.1 to 9.1 meters) above the Rosebud-McKay coal bed and the other is 5 to 10 feet (1.5 to 3 meters) below the Rosebud-McKay bed. The small beds are no more than 5 feet (1.5 meters) thick.

Crow Indians have preferential employment rights in the Westmoreland mining operations involving coal owned by the tribe. The Absaloka Mine now employs 110 persons, including 53 Crow Indians. Employment would rise to 210 workers by the time peak production would be reached in 1981.

A summary included with the final statement listed the following environmental impacts of the proposed mining plan:

The existing land surface, vegetation and all aquifers above the base of the Robinson Coal in the proposed mine area would be destroyed.

- Wildlife habitats would be disrupted until disturbed areas were revegetated and human intrusions terminated.
- Ground and surface water quantity and quality, livestock grazing, scenic views and open space qualities would be degraded and restricted until revegetation was successfully completed.
- Dust and noise would be increased locally until recontouring and revegetation were successfully completed.
- Livestock and wildlife forage would be reduced until revegetation was successful.
- Employment for the Crow Indians and other citizens of Big Horn County would be increased.
- Tax and royalty income for the Crow Tribe, the State of Montana and Big Horn County would be increased.

Copies of the final statement are available for public review at the OSGS Public Inquiries Office, 1012 Federal Building, 1961 Stout St., Denver, Colo.; USGS Library, Denver West Office Park, Building 3, 1526 Cole Blvd., Golden, Colo.; USGS Library, Room 4A100, USGS National Center, 12201 Sunrise Valley Drive, Reston, Va.; U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Billings Area Office, 316 North 26th St., Billings, Mont.; Office of the Superintendent, Crow Agency, Mont.; Billings Public Library, 510 N. Broadway, Billings, Mont.; Library, Eastern Montana College, Billings, Mont.; and Big Horn County Library, 419 N. Custer Ave., Hardin, Mont.

A limited number of single copies of the statement are available from the USGS Public Inquiries Office, 1012 Federal Building, 1961 Stout St., Denver, Colo. 80202; and from the U.S. Geological Survey, Land Information and Analysis Office, Environmental Impact Analysis Program, Stop 602, Denver Federal Center, Box 25046, Lakewood, Colo. 80204.