

Activists to express dismay at agency merger meetings

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A series of public meetings around the country begins today on the propose merger of the nation's top coal mining regulatory agency with the office that oversees public lands, a move that has caused controversy among industry leaders and environmental advocates alike.

The 10 gatherings -- starting this evening in St. Louis and ending later this month in Lexington, Ky. -- are meant to engage Interior Department employees, industry officials and coal-field activists about the proposal to fold the Office of Surface Mining into the much larger Bureau of Land Management.

In a change of strategy last November, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said his order merging the two agencies would not take effect until after gathering input. A report on the meetings is due Feb. 15.

"This is consistent with the Secretary's plan to not move forward with a potential consolidation without full coordination and input of employees, members of Congress, states, tribes, industry, representatives of communities affected by coal production and other interested parties," said an Interior press release about the meetings.

But that olive branch has failed to appease activists who have been either deeply skeptical of or outright opposed to the plan. They worry the merger will dilute OSM's responsibility to protect communities under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act.

Aimee Erickson, head of Pennsylvania-based Citizens Coal Council, said groups have been holding talks to mobilize activists to attend the meetings. "Some areas there are going to be more people, like Appalachia," she said.

"We have been working on this for weeks now," Erickson added in an interview. "I am planning to travel to every one of those meetings."

While Interior is looking for common ground and understanding among those potentially affected by the merger, the agenda of many activists attending the meetings will be to stop it from moving forward. Many of them don't buy Interior's promise of continued OSM independence and potential increased funding for reclamation priorities.

"The secretary's attempt to bury the OSM inside the BLM dishonors the letter and spirit of SMCRA, undercuts the secretary's trust obligation to Native Americans, and his order should be withdrawn," said Vernon Masayesva, executive director of the Black Mesa Trust, an American Indian advocacy group in Arizona.

The meetings are in some of the United States' top coal producing areas, including Montana, West Virginia and Tennessee. A gathering is also planned at Interior headquarters in Washington, D.C.

"These meetings will include discussions on how best to maintain OSM's status as an independent bureau with regulatory responsibilities under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act," Interior said, "while exploring ways to integrate some administrative functions of both entities."

The National Mining Association said it had provided members nationwide with information in case they wanted to attend the meetings.

A reclamation official with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Scott Fowler, said he does not plan to attend the first meeting in neighboring St. Louis. He said the jury is still out on whether the OSM-BLM merger is a good idea based on the information released.