

Community Health Effects of Mountaintop Removal

A written statement by Nina McCoy, resident of Martin County, Kentucky
April 2019

I am writing today, not to discuss the acute or chronic health impacts of the process of mountaintop removal mining. While I know those exist, others are more qualified to speak to that evidence.

However, I can honestly testify to what is left behind for an Appalachian community after the mining has ceased, the coal companies have been shuttered and the profits are buried in Wall Street's memories and the bank accounts of heirs of coal barons.

The current state of my home is one of overarching sickness of hopelessness and loss of faith in our democracy.

In 1964 President Lyndon Johnson came to Inez, Kentucky to kick off the "War on Poverty" because, at the time, Martin County was the poorest all white community in the United States. Fast forward to 2018 when Martin County was named the "Worst White Majority County in the United States" by *US News and World Report*.

Anyone reading those two headlines would be willing to declare that the War on Poverty was ineffective at best and destructive at the very worst. However, what must be remembered are the billions of dollars' worth of coal that were dug, blasted, and scraped out of our hills in the intervening 54 years.

It is important to note that Martin County is NOT even the poorest majority white community in Kentucky at this time. So how did we get the glory of again being considered a "worst community?" Perhaps it is a poverty of spirit, a poverty of prospect, a poverty of faith, that gives us the unwanted title.

While a few in our community are still hoping for the mines to come back and supply the good paying jobs of the '70s, '80s and '90s, many are still afraid to talk openly about the destruction the companies left behind; and most put the blame on our democratically elected leaders that turned the other way.

The pervasive sickness responsible for the lack of progress is one of unregulated and unbridled greed which allowed our watersheds to be buried or polluted, our coal miners to be left with black lung and work related injuries without the promise of healthcare, and 30 percent of our beloved mountains to be leveled in the name of "cheap" energy and increased profit margins.

While Jesus' warnings about "unrighteous mammon" have fallen on deaf ears for the Fox News evangelicals, and the 2008 Wall Street collapse hasn't proven even to the elite liberals that the "invisible hand" of economics cannot be trusted, perhaps Martin County, Kentucky, is one of a multitude of examples that can attest to the long term damage of a belief in "trickle-down

economics.”

I leave you with an excerpt from a New York Times Magazine article by John Egerton from nearly 40 years ago, October 18, 1981, which includes a quote from an unlikely prophet, Robert (Mike) Duncan, president of Inez Deposit Bank, past chairman of the RNC, cofounder of American Crossroads, and current chairman of the Board of Governors of the US Postal Service:

And even Robert Duncan, the banker, despite his support of President Reagan’s economic policies, stops short of saying that Martin County’s public programs and services or its continuing social and environmental problems can, or should, become the responsibility of the private sector.

“We can’t make it on our own,” he says. “A strong economy will have its trickle-down effects, but government will still have a major role to play.”

Mr. Duncan’s ambition is to have all the parties with interest in Martin County’s future work together on a long-range plan to assure its survival and improvement. The corporations, he says, should lead the way. “If we could get the top executives to come in here and see the whole picture, I think they’d realize what’s being taken and what’s being put back, and they’d be more charitable...Public and private leaders working together can assure a bright future for Martin County, and I have faith that it will happen. If it doesn’t, this place could be a wasteland.”

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to 2019 and the wasteland that is Martin County, Kentucky. Let us be a warning to other communities depending on the “job creators” to trickle down prosperity.

While our governor is giving tax breaks to the wealthy corporations, Martin County has joined Flint, Michigan, in being a national poster child for a failing drinking water system. To add insult to injury leaders in Washington and Frankfort are promising millions of tax dollars to pump reliable drinking water up to leveled off MTR sites where the watershed was destroyed, to attract industry. That is not a trickling down, it is a siphoning up.

It is past time to return to the era where a government works with and for PEOPLE- not the corporations.