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Editorial

Mountaintop Rescue

Mountaintop mining is a cheap and ruthlessly efficient way to mine coal: soil and rock are scraped away by enormous machines to expose the buried coal seam, then dumped down the mountainside into the valleys and streams below.

Mountaintop mining has also caused appalling environmental damage in violation of the Clean Water Act. According to a federal study, mountaintop removal has buried or choked 1,200 miles of Appalachian streams and damaged hundreds of square miles of forests.

No recent administration, Democrat or Republican, has made a serious effort to end the dumping, largely in deference to the financial influence of the coal industry and the political influence of Robert Byrd, West Virginia's senior senator. But the Bush administration has gone out of its way to shield the practice. In 2002 and 2004, the Environmental Protection Agency — confronted with complaints that mountaintop mining violated regulations prohibiting the dumping of mine wastes in streams — simply changed the regulations to allow it to continue.

Now a federal judge has inspired hopes that this destructive nonsense can be brought to a halt. In a case argued by two advocacy groups, Earthjustice and the Appalachian Center for the Economy and the Environment, Judge Robert Chambers of Federal District Court halted four mountaintop removal projects on the grounds that the Army Corps of Engineers — which issued permits for the projects — had failed to demonstrate that the damage would not be irreversible. He also said the corps had failed to conduct the necessary environmental reviews.

Local residents who have watched the destruction of their landscape hope the ruling will lead to tighter regulation of other mountaintop mining proposals. The greater hope is that the government can be persuaded to stop the practice altogether.