

Ohio State University student learns about mountaintop removal in the coal fields



Mike Roselle addresses the crowd.

WEST VIRGINIA—“On December 7, 2009, a rally against mountaintop removal mining was staged at West Virginia’s Department of Environmental Protection’s headquarters in Charleston. During the rally, miners who support mountaintop removal gathered at the same location. As my second day as a new intern at Ohio Citizen Action, and a novice at protesting, I did not know what to expect at this protest. At this protest to save Coal River Mountain, I learned many aspects of rallies, as well as much more about concerns of mountaintop removal I had not previously considered.

Saving Coal River Mountain from being destroyed by mountaintop removal was the overall purpose of the rally. Coal River Mountain is a last remaining mountain in Coal River Valley. Furthermore, it is the site of a coal slurry retention pond; blasting from mountaintop removal mining could break the slurry pond, contaminating drinking water and putting the valley’s residents at a lethal risk. Dynamite blasting on Coal River Mountain began occurring a few weeks ago, stirring controversies and more sentiments towards mining in this area. Mountaintop removal mining protesters wanted this devastating method of extracting coal to be banned from Coal River Mountain; the miners wanted the mountaintop removal mining preferred method of extraction on Coal River Mountain to continue as is.



Lorelei Scarboro

Mountaintop removal mining protesters had many more speakers than I expected, and all presented various points of the issue. Some speakers, such as Lorelei Scarboro and Chuck Nelson, had an emotional effect on me. Lorelei and Chuck were some of many speakers that spoke from the heart; they have lived in West Virginia their whole lives. From this experience, they know the many hardships that come with living in a rural, poverty-stricken area with few job opportunities. Lorelei's husband and Chuck worked in coal mines. By speaking of these experiences, they created a sense of validity among the audience - coal miners included - as they were speakers that coal miners could relate to the best. Their speeches had profound effects on the coal miners protesting in the separate barricade section. I heard increased shouting and lewd comments from miners as the most influential speakers expressed their opinions. However, as I looked across the barricade, I noticed some were listening to the influential speakers. As I noticed this, I hoped these influential speakers created a positive effect and helped miners understand why anti-mountaintop removal mining protesters were advocates against mountaintop removal mining of Coal River Mountain.

Throughout the many speeches, coal trucks drove by slowly, blaring air horns. They were very distracting, especially at very inappropriate times, such as the group prayers to initiate the rally. A coal miner also slipped into the mountaintop removal mining protester crowd, creating a minor disturbance. Both sides of the issue shouted offensive statements to each other. I found myself wondering if the police would intervene at any point in time, as they were in the middle of an increasingly agitated crowd. The police did not arrest anyone at this rally (as far as I know) although I do believe they could have given citations to the coal truck drivers who were honking their horns throughout the rally.

The keynote speaker, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., appeared towards the end of the rally. As everyone anticipated his arrival, the shouting and air horns increased as he took stage. Many times throughout his speech, he paused for air horns to subside before resuming his speech. As he is a nationally recognized figure with prominent status, it seemed very rude for the miners to create large disruptions during his speech. Though he had many disruptions, Kennedy stated many troubling facts about mountaintop removal mining and contaminated streams along with personal experiences throughout the entire Appalachian region. With these personal experiences and struggles within the fight to stop mountaintop removal, Kennedy influenced the audience greatly with his speech.

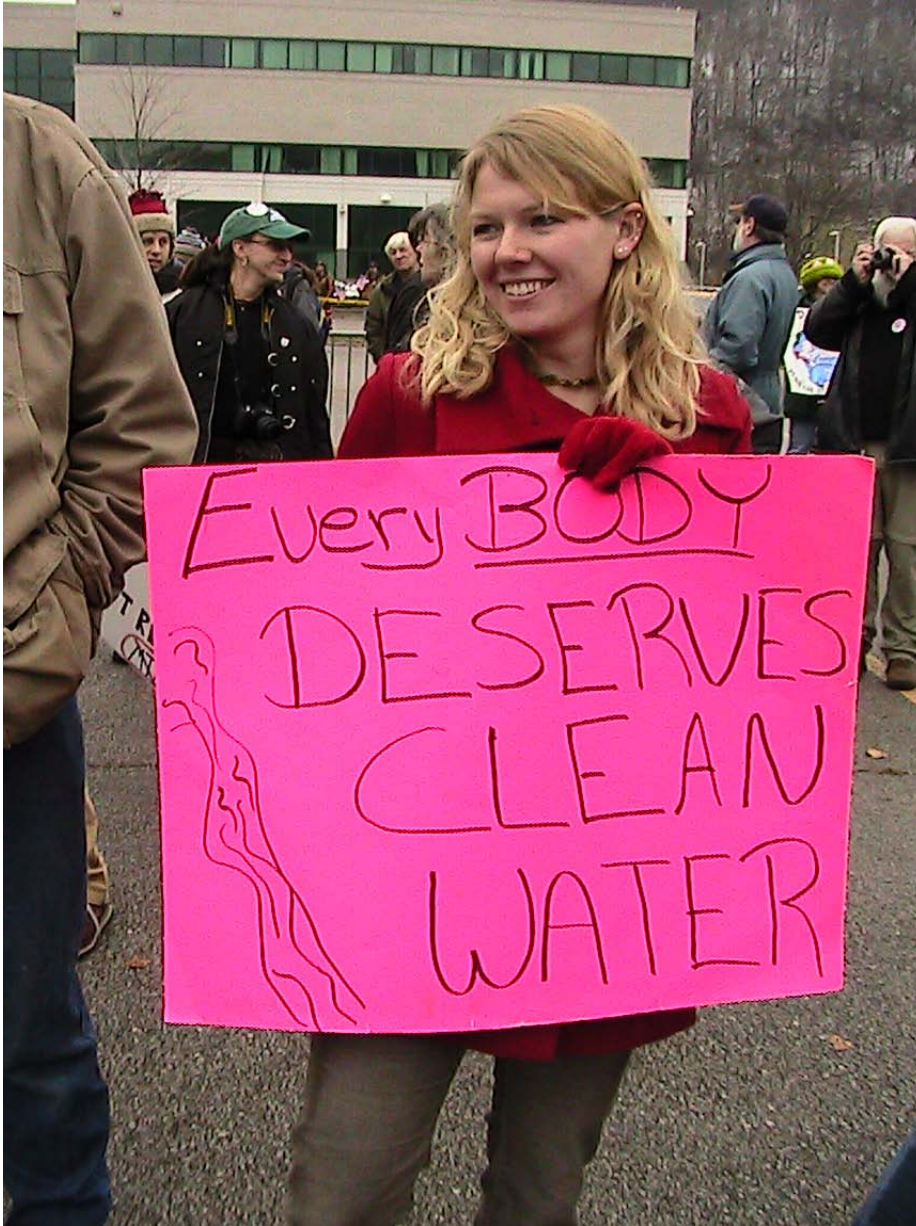
Surprisingly, the vast majority of protesters stayed until the end of the protest – about three hours of standing in very cold weather outside. This showed true dedication to this issue. I could tell many of the speakers were ones who had spoken many times before at protests and hearings – people who have dedicated many years to coal mining issues. The anti-mountaintop removal mining crowd seemed to know each other, as many were protesters that had been to many rallies before. Many speakers promised the DEP and opposing coal miners that they would be seeing each other at protests as long as mountaintop removal mining continued.



From my personal viewpoint, I genuinely hope to see mountaintop removal banned immediately. I did not have a solidified opinion on mountaintop removal mining prior to this protest; because I thought mountaintop removal mining bans would in turn make coal miners lose their jobs. As I am from Appalachia, and know firsthand about poor areas that need employment, I

certainly did not want to help lose jobs. However, from many speakers and further confirmation by research, I realized a mountaintop removal mining ban would bring back more deep mining jobs; a win-win situation pertaining to Coal River Mountain.

Advocates would like to ban mountaintop removal mining on Coal River Mountain, use deep mining on the mountain (to retain jobs), and also create a wind farm at the top of Coal River Mountain. After hearing the speakers at this protest, I find this solution plausible, and I truly hope the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection and federal government consider this solution. This protest was one of many efforts that can help make a difference for current and future generations. I was lucky enough to witness this firsthand and gain valuable experience by listening to the many concerns within an issue. After this great experience, I will definitely return to mountaintop removal protests in the future,” Katie Colegrove, Intern, *Ohio Citizen Action*



Katie Colegrove