

## MEMORANDUM

**TO: Center for American Progress**  
**FROM: Hart Research Associates**  
**DATE: January 21, 2016**  
**RE: Public Opinion on the Federal Coal Leasing Program**

On behalf of the Center for American Progress, Hart Research conducted a national survey of 1,024 registered voters, including national oversamples of 188 African-American voters and 188 Hispanic voters, as well as 201 interviews with registered voters living in Rocky Mountain States.<sup>1</sup> These interviews were conducted online from January 11 to 17, 2016. The survey explored voters' views about coal mining on national public lands and a proposed review of the federal coal leasing program and moratorium on new leases to coal companies for mining.

The key findings as reviewed in this memo reveal that there is considerable support for the Obama administration's moratorium on new leases of public lands to coal companies while undertaking a comprehensive review of the federal coal leasing program. The interviews also provide feedback on how various arguments for federal coal leasing reform resonate with voters nationally and in the Rocky Mountain States.

### **1) Large majorities of Americans react favorably to the Obama administration's proposal to undertake a comprehensive review of the federal coal leasing program.**

- Two in three voters (67% nationwide, including 53% of voters in Rocky Mountain States) feel favorable toward the Obama administration's decision to undertake a comprehensive review of the federal coal leasing program with no new leases of national public lands to coal companies for mining during this time.

Suppose you heard that the Obama administration decided to undertake a comprehensive review of the federal coal leasing program, and during the period of this review there would be no new leases of national public lands to coal companies for mining.

What would your reaction be to learning this?

Total favorable: 67%  
Total unfavorable: 33%

- Support for the proposal is broad, spanning all four regions of the country, and includes large majorities of Democrats (87%) and independents (66%). Republicans are more mixed on the proposal, with 48% favorable and 52%

<sup>1</sup> Rocky Mountain States were defined as Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming.

unfavorable. More than half (55%) of voters who have positive feelings about the use of coal as an energy source are favorable toward the Obama administration's decision.

### **2) Support for the policy is durable and voters continue to support the policy even after hearing point-counterpoint arguments, including attacks that the proposal is part of a so-called "war on coal."**

- Support for the Obama administration's review of the federal coal program and moratorium on new leases remains strong after respondents hear arguments that the policy is part of the Obama administration's so-called war on coal and claims that it would put hardworking Americans out of work and raise electricity rates for consumers. Sixty-six percent (66%) of voters say they feel favorable toward the review and leasing moratorium after hearing reasons in favor and opposition to the policy, including 55% of voters in Rocky Mountain States.

### **3) Support for the policy is consistent with voters' reservations about leasing federal land for coal mining and their ambivalence about coal as an energy source.**

- Nearly three in five (58%) voters have an unfavorable reaction to hearing that the federal government leases public lands, mainly in Wyoming and Montana, to companies to mine for coal. Solid majorities of Democrats (70%) and independents (61%) describe their reaction as unfavorable.
- About half (49%) of voters say that the United States should *decrease* the use of coal in the next 10 years, while only 20% say we should increase the use of coal. By contrast, overwhelming majorities of voters believe that the United States should *increase* the use of solar power (86%) and wind power (82%). The substantial preference for clean, renewable energy sources over finite, dirtier sources is apparent across parties and among voters in Rocky Mountain States.

### **4) Environmental concerns are the most important consideration for voters when evaluating the leasing of public lands to coal companies for mining.**

- The two standout concerns for voters when evaluating whether, where, and how the federal government should lease public lands to coal companies for mining both focus on the environment. Nearly two in three voters (64%) say whether a mining company has cleaned up the areas it already has mined should be a very important consideration when the federal government makes decisions on leasing of public lands. Fifty-four percent (54%) say the overall environmental impact of the mining should be a very important consideration. The number of jobs created and the impact on electricity rates are lower tier concerns.

**Importance of different considerations that might come into play when the federal government decides whether, where, and how to lease national public lands to coal companies for mining.**

	<b>Nationally Very Important %</b>	<b>Rocky Mtn Voters Very important %</b>
Whether a mining company has cleaned up the areas it has already mined	64	64
The overall environmental impact of the mining	54	54
The direct and indirect impact on climate change	46	41
Whether the coal companies are paying a fair price for taxpayer-owned coal	43	40
Whether the leasing of public lands is a good deal for taxpayers	40	35
The number of jobs that will be created	37	40
The impact on electricity rates	36	32

**5) Two reasons to support the Obama administration’s review of the federal coal leasing program and moratorium on new leases have particular resonance with voters: accelerating our transition to clean energy and protecting public lands for future generations.**

- Voters rated 10 different reasons to support a comprehensive review and moratorium including statements about fairness to taxpayers, fighting climate change, “keep it in the ground,” and protecting the environment. The two strongest reasons with the broadest appeal (shown below) reflect voters’ concerns about the impact of coal mining on the environment and the importance voters place on increasing our reliance on renewable sources of energy instead. Large majorities of voters say these messages make them more supportive of the review and moratorium, and more importantly, these reasons elicit the most intense support across the widest range of subgroups (including independents) with two in five overall saying each reason makes them *much* more supportive.

The vast majority of federal coal lies under prairies, ranchlands, and valuable wildlife habitat in the Powder River Basin in Wyoming and Montana. More of these lands would have to be strip-mined to extract the coal that is underneath them, **causing widespread pollution and environmental destruction**. A full review of the federal coal program will **ensure that future coal mining is done in a way that better protects our public lands, streams, and wildlife** so we can continue to use and **enjoy these areas for generations to come** (69% more supportive, including 40% much more supportive).

We need the review period to **make smart choices about where we invest in energy for our future and accelerate our transition to clean energy**. We should be focusing on clean, renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and hydropower instead of flooding the market with cheap, dirty coal sold at depressed prices (69% more supportive, including 39% much more supportive).

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- Ensuring taxpayers get a fair deal from coal companies is the message that gets the most overall support nationally (71% more supportive), but voters respond with a comparatively lower level of intensity of support (32% *much* more supportive). This message fares less well with more liberal voters and environmentalists, but conservatives and Republicans are the one exception: they rate the reason below on par with protecting our public lands for generations to come. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of Conservatives say making sure taxpayers are getting a fair deal will make them *much* more supportive while 29% say the same about protecting lands for future generations. Q9

This review is necessary to **make sure that taxpayers are getting a fair deal**. The rules governing coal royalties are a quarter of a century old or older, and **loopholes in the government's coal program allow companies mining coal on public lands to game the system and cheat taxpayers**. This costs U.S. taxpayers and state governments more than one billion dollars a year in lost royalties—money that could be used for local schools, roads, and other expenses.

- “Keep it in the ground” (shown below) is an especially powerful reason among left-leaning groups and environmental allies. Democrats (56%), liberals (60%), and self-described “environmentalists” (53%) say this reason makes them *much* more supportive of the policy and far greater numbers say this makes them somewhat or much more supportive. However, independents and Republicans find this reason relatively less persuasive than other messages.

Many scientists say that in order to **avoid reaching the tipping point in the earth's temperature, which will result in severe climate impacts, we can't afford to burn all the fossil fuels that are available**. In fact, study after study has found that moving beyond coal is the single most important means of limiting carbon pollution and scientists have recently concluded that in order to meet modest climate targets, **the United States must keep 95% of its recoverable coal reserves in the ground**.

- The most compelling reasons to support the proposal are slightly different for voters in Rocky Mountain States compared to voters nationwide. While Rocky Mountain voters rate accelerating our transition to clean energy highly, two reasons that focus on taxpayers also resonate. Notably, voters in Rocky Mountain States react less favorably to statements that call attention to the fact that burning coal from public lands in the Powder River Basin produces 10% of all U.S. fossil fuel emissions or that we need a review to ensure the policy is fair to coal producers in other states. The three reasons shown below receive the most intensive support among Rocky Mountain voters.

We need the review period to **make smart choices about where we invest in energy for our future and accelerate our transition to clean energy**. We should be focusing on clean, renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and hydropower instead of flooding the market with cheap, dirty coal sold at depressed prices (60% Rocky Mountain voters more supportive, including 31% *much* more supportive).

This review is similar to one that was conducted under Republican President Richard Nixon in 1971. At that time, President Nixon also instituted a moratorium on new coal leasing on public lands until the federal government could correct problems with coal industry speculation and an unfair return to taxpayers. **It has now been more**

**than 40 years since this last review, so it is time for a fresh look at how to modernize the program** (60% Rocky Mountain voters more supportive, including 29% much more supportive).

**Coal companies are mining taxpayer-owned coal at a huge discount, and then passing the pollution costs along to the rest of us** as we face dirtier air, abandoned mines, and the growing impacts of climate change. We need a comprehensive review of the federal coal program to **ensure that coal companies are cleaning up their pollution and paying their fair share of the environmental costs** of coal mining (56% Rocky Mountain voters more supportive, including 31% much more supportive).

### **6) On two key points of contention, solid majorities of voters are *more likely to agree with the case in support of the review and moratorium.***

- Opponents' critique that the Obama administration is waging a war on coal and costing hardworking Americans their jobs falls short against an effective argument that reassures voters that coal-mining communities will remain intact during the review process.

**Opponents' critique: War on coal.** Opponents say the Obama administration is waging a war on coal on behalf of environmentalists who don't care about putting hardworking Americans out of work. Coal mining has long provided stable, high-paying jobs to American workers. This job-killing moratorium will put valuable jobs at risk by eliminating coal mining jobs directly and indirectly eliminating other industries that rely on coal from railroads to power plants (42% agree).

**Supporters' response/Taxpayer and jobs frame.** Supporters say that companies producing coal from existing federal coal leases have already leased enough coal and will therefore be able to continue mining and those jobs and communities will stay intact during the review process. They also say that the federal coal program is fundamentally broken and that a comprehensive review is needed so that taxpayers don't continue to get shortchanged through subsidies, loopholes, and special breaks for coal companies (58% agree).

- Similarly, the critique that electricity rates will rise as a result of the moratorium and taxpayers will end up footing the bill does not pass muster with voters. By 18 points, voters agree more with supporters' counterargument that clean energy is more affordable and stable for consumers and that coal will likely only become more expensive over time. Democrats (73%) as well as independents (61%) are more likely to agree with supporters' position.

**Opponents** of a moratorium on new coal leases on public lands say that coal mined from national public lands provides American taxpayers with very low cost electricity. Without competition from new leases, the price of coal will increase and hardworking Americans will have to foot the bill in their monthly electricity payments (41% agree).

**Supporters** of a moratorium on new coal leases on public lands say clean energy is more affordable and stable for consumers. New wind and solar plants are already less expensive than new coal plants and prices will continue to fall as technology improves. Meanwhile, the cheapest and most accessible coal has already been mined, meaning that coal will likely become a more expensive energy source over the coming years (59% agree).