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Alaskans Press Federal Agency to Protect Health of Mat-Su
Community groups challenge decision upholding Wishbone Hill Coal Mine permit

Palmer, AK – The Castle Mountain Coalition and several other groups took action to protect health and quality of life in the Mat-Su today by filing a lawsuit against the federal Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSM) for its recent decision to allow Usibelli Coal to operate under an expired permit at its proposed Wishbone Hill coal mine.

“Usibelli’s proposed Wishbone Hill Coal Strip Mine threatens our quality of life and the health of our families in the Mat-Su,” said Shawna Whaley, a mother and Castle Mountain Coalition board member who lives in Chickaloon. “From filling the air our children breathe with toxic coal dust to putting a dangerous coal truck on our roads every 15 minutes, this proposal would drastically change life in the Mat-Su, and not for the better.”

The law states that if a company doesn’t start mining operations within three years, the permit expires. Though its permit was issued in 1991, Usibelli did not even start building a road until 2010. The population of the Mat-Su borough has more than doubled since the original permit for the Wishbone Hill Coal Strip Mine was issued. In that time several neighborhoods have been developed within one mile of the proposed strip mine.

“As one of the fastest-growing communities in the nation, the Mat Valley looks significantly different than it did when the original permit was issued,” said Whaley. “Building a coal strip mine adjacent to homes where children play every day is a dangerous proposition. A new permit application would give residents a chance to weigh in on how the mine would be run, which is especially important given the population growth in the area.”

In summer of 2012, residents in the Mat Valley applauded a preliminary decision by the OSM that the decades-old mining permit for Wishbone Hill was no longer valid. In a decision that shocked and disappointed local residents, OSM reversed the decision in November of 2014.

“By allowing Usibelli to operate the Wishbone Hill Coal Strip Mine with an expired permit, OSM is preventing current residents from having a voice in ensuring that our health and our quality of life is protected if mining proceeds,” said Whaley. “The Matanuska Valley is a wonderful place to call home and to raise a family. Local residents deserve the opportunity to fully assess how a giant coal strip mine adjacent to residential neighborhoods will change our community.”

The groups, which collectively represent nearly 3,000 Mat-Su residents, are represented by Trustees for Alaska, a non-profit public interest environmental law firm.

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Castle Mountain Coalition is dedicated to promoting ecological integrity, economic sustainability, and quality of life in the Matanuska watershed