

ANNIE JANE COTTEN: Hey, ya'll. My name is Annie Jane Cotten, and I live in Southwest Virginia in Wise County, an area heavily impacted by mining and federal coal policy. The Federal Leasing Program is rooted in principles whose far-ranging impacts have disproportionately been borne by economically disadvantaged and minority communities, including indigenous communities in the Southwest who have endured forced relocation at the hands of the BML, communities of color in the deep and Appalachian South and communities throughout the region in which I now live. I urge you to terminate all new and current federal leasing to extractive industries and to instead turn your efforts toward the future in which the deep and abiding connection to land that so many feel is honored. It is very literally a request for a chance at a future in which climate change, though inevitable and ongoing at this point, can be combated with the best and most available resources. Your current self-funding policies do not allow this. I'm originally from the deep South and someone who has family scattered throughout coal and climate change-impacted areas in Mississippi and Alabama. I have watched the places that I love deeply, the Gulf South, devastated by Hurricane Katrina. As someone who worked for four years in post-Katrina in New Orleans, I can attest to the reality that climate change is real, is brutal, and is devastating. It is literally killing people. Please, I urge you to not turn your hearts and minds away from the enormity of the task at hand. Halt your leasing, honor your treaties, and turn your hand instead to our survival. As a healer, as a woods walker, as someone who dreams the future of all of our people into being, as someone whose heart and soul are rooted in these places and the people who love them, I implore you not to stand in the way of our future. We are building it. It is beautiful. It is lively. It is full of justice and opportunity for so many people. Please don't stand in our way.