

JIM SCHEFF: Hello. My name is Jim Scheff. I'm the Director of Kentucky Heartwood, a public lands and forest advocacy organization based in Berea, Kentucky. Our organization has reviewed, commented on, and appealed several federal coal leases on the Daniel Boone National Forest including the recent Bledsoe coal lease, which will be the subject of my comments today. The Bledsoe Coal Lease is a relatively small federal coal lease proposed in 2012 to allow the Bledsoe Coal Company to expand mining operations at its Beech Fork Mine in Leslie County, Kentucky. In 2011, the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) issued the first successful Powder in Violations Enforcement Action since the passage of the 1977 Mine Act against Bledsoe Coal citing repeated significant and substantial violations of mandatory safety and health standards at the Abner Branch Mine in Leslie County, about six miles from the Beech Fork Mine. As reported by the Lexington Herald Leader, Bledsoe Coal's failure to adhere to legally acquired safety measures resulted in twenty-one accidents, ten injuries, and one death during a fourteen-month period ending in April 2011. In January of 2012, the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service issued a scoping notice regarding their intent to lease federal coal to Bledsoe Coal. Six months later, a follow-up inspection by MSHA found continuing serious safety violations at the Abner Branch Mine, resulting in an eight-day shut down. In July of 2012, MSHA issued a press release stating, in part: "It's clear that in the case of the Abner Branch, a mine already on a pattern of violations, all of which's tools may not be enough, but until that changes, we will use what we have and aggressively enforce the law to ensure men and women who go into a mine at the beginning of a shift can come back out at the end of it." A year after this statement by MSHA, the BLM signed a decision notice and finding of no significant impact approving the lease. While these issues were raised in our comments and appealed the lease, they were dismissed as being outside the scope of relevant issues. Contrary to position of the federal government, we believe that coal companies that flaunt mine safety laws and put miners at risk should not be rewarded with a federal coal lease. In terms of the environmental analysis, the BLM enforcer failed to consider an appropriate range of indirect and environmental effects including issues related to human health, air pollution from coal combustion, coal ash disposal, and impacts on our climate. The agency's furthermore negative economic effect including monetized human health impacts, it lauded the local and regional economic benefits from allowing the lease to move forward. Conversely, the agency has dismissed many foreseeable direct and indirect environmental impacts, arguing that if the lease were not approved, then the same volume of coal would be mined elsewhere with no net differences in the environmental effects. To say that the environmental effects will simply be displaced, but that the economic benefits are additive reveals substantial bias and even dishonesty on the part of the BLM and Forest Service in analyzing and approving federal coal leases in Kentucky. Our experience with the Federal Coal Leasing Program in Kentucky is that the process is deeply biased and it rewards bad actors. The environmental moxie of these leases are essentially a formality with a predetermined outcome. I urge the Department of Interior to engage in the honest accounting of the Federal Coal Leasing Program and to help move our nation beyond coal and toward a renewable energy economy. And thank you for your consideration of these comments.