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## Stop selling off federal coal at taxpayer expense

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A coal train approaches SAM's Olympic Sculpture Park, Friday, April 26, 2013, in Seattle.

**We urge readers to speak out at Tuesday's public hearing in Seattle and insist that the federal Bureau of Land Management stop selling off federal coal at taxpayer expense.**

By [Paul G. Allen](#) and [Maria Cantwell](#)

*Special to The Times*

THIS week is your chance to help fix a dirty deal on public lands.

On half a million acres of public land across the West, private companies hold federal leases for almost 8 billion tons of coal, enough for 20 more years of mining. All this coal was sold off at bargain-basement prices, often without competitive bidding. Worse yet, the science used to justify these sales dates from the days when disco was at the top of the charts — and both music and science have come a long way since the 1970s.

Under the leadership of U.S. Interior Secretary, and fellow Washingtonian, Sally Jewell, the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) oversees federal coal leases. In January, Jewell suspended new leasing and ordered the first top-to-bottom review of the program in more than 30 years. We applaud her for taking this important step.

### **Coal: leave it in the ground or burn it?**

Revising old programs to make sure they reflect current knowledge and the public interest is not just a good idea, it is our leaders' responsibility. In fact, five former presidents — four Republicans and one Democrat — paved the way for Jewell's

action by suspending coal sales from public lands while they fixed the problems they saw with the coal program.

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Unfortunately, the BLM's coal-leasing policies — based on outdated science and economics — make the federal government the nation's discount supplier of choice for coal sold to private companies. This giveaway has come at great financial and environmental cost. It has also come at the expense of other uses of public land, like the tourism and outdoor-recreation industries that fuel so much of our economy.

Why should this broken coal-leasing program matter to the average citizen? Because as taxpayers, we are all subsidizing this strip-mining of coal from our own land.

The subsidy comes from underpricing coal. Under current rules, private coal companies in single-bidder auctions are establishing the lowest coal prices in the nation. In real terms, our government sells federal coal from Montana for, on average, 12 cents per ton. To put that into perspective, that's 33 tons of coal for the price of a Big Mac.

This taxpayer subsidy distorts the energy market. It also privatizes profits and socializes costs, such as the economic impacts of climate change. Even without factoring in the costs of climate change, the public should be getting a higher return on its natural resources.

Consider the numbers: While our government often sells public coal for pennies per ton, burning it actually ends up costing the public about \$70 per ton. This gap between the revenue we collect and the cost to society is indefensible.

Coal-fueled climate change is already hurting Washington and other Western states, triggering lower snowpack, droughts and flooding, and longer and more intense wildfire seasons. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration, 2015 was Washington state's hottest on record, and we're off to a hotter-than-normal 2016 as well.

The time has come to accelerate America's shift away from the dirty, carbon-based fuels of the past to the cleaner, more efficient fuels of the future. The federal government should continue investing in clean energy and stop subsidizing private companies to take coal from public lands. BLM needs to update its science, rethink the government's role in the coal market and recognize that public land has better and more lucrative long-term uses that are being damaged by letting private companies strip-mine it for coal.

We urge readers to speak out at [Tuesday's BLM public hearing in Seattle](#) and insist that the agency stop selling off federal coal at taxpayer expense.

Secretary Jewell has established an excellent record in the private and public sectors as a strong steward and champion of America's extraordinary natural inheritance. We call on her to continue that record by fixing the federal coal-leasing program and helping America advance toward a cleaner, more sustainable future.

*Paul G. Allen is a global philanthropist, founder and chairman of Vulcan and is co-founder of Microsoft. Maria Cantwell is a U.S. senator from Washington and ranking member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee.*

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management is taking [public comment on the federal government's coal program](#) from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., June 21 at the Sheraton Seattle Hotel at 1400 6th Ave.

The meeting will be live-streamed: [www.blm.gov/live](http://www.blm.gov/live)

Written comment may be submitted until July 28.

**Email:**BLM\_WO\_Coal\_Program\_PEIS\_Comments@blm.gov

**Mail:**

Coal Programmatic EIS Scoping  
Bureau of Land Management  
20 M St. SE, Room 2134 LM  
Washington, D.C., 20003

