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October 23, 2008

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Majority of Voters Oppose Mountaintop Removal Mining in First Nationwide Opinion Poll Voters feel environment deteriorating, oppose push to repeal Stream Buffer Zone rule

Washington, D.C.: In the first nationwide poll on mountaintop removal mining, two out of three likely voters oppose recent efforts by the Bush administration to repeal an environmental law known as the Stream Buffer Zone rule, which prohibits mining activities within 100 feet of a stream. Upon hearing that "more than 1,200 miles of streams in Appalachia already have been buried or destroyed by mountaintop removal coal mining," fully 85% of voters say they are concerned about the effects of this mining practice.

The practice of mountaintop removal coal mining—where hundreds of feet are blown off the tops of mountains to get at thin coal seams, and the remaining rock and waste is dumped into nearby valleys—has long been opposed by many residents of Appalachia. This newest poll, the first to test voters' views of this practice nationwide, illustrates that voters in every region of the country are similarly against mountaintop removal mining.

"Throughout the entire term of the Bush administration, federal agencies charged with enforcing the law have instead done all they could to roll back regulations and ignore environmental protections to allow mountaintop removal mining to continue. But people across the country recognize what this administration has not: that mountaintop removal mining is simply wrong," said Joan Mulhern, senior legislative counsel at Earthjustice. "Voters aren't fooled by attempts to allow this destruction to continue."

Last week, the Department of the Interior's Office of Surface Mining (OSM) made the final moves on a proposal to repeal the Stream Buffer Zone rule, a Reagan-era regulation that prohibits surface coal mining activities from disturbing areas within 100 feet of permanent and seasonal streams. OSM is trying to clear the path for more mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia by allowing streams and headwaters to be permanently buried with mining waste and "overburden."

The nationwide survey of 1,000 likely voters conducted by two firms, Lake Research Partners and Bellwether Research and Consulting on behalf of Earthjustice, the Sierra Club and Appalachian Center for the Economy and Environment, shows overwhelming opposition to the changes to the Stream buffer Zone rule. Fully 66% of those polled oppose the repeal of the protections for streams, with nearly half (49%) who "strongly oppose" the repeal.

"The level of public opposition to this rule change is remarkable, until one considers the larger context: even in a tough economy, Americans see environmental protections as an economic boon by a 2:1 margin," said Daniel Gottoff of Lake Research Partners.

"These poll results make very clear that people think we should not sacrifice streams by allowing them to be filled in with mining waste," said Ed Hopkins, director of Sierra Club's Environmental Quality Program. "The Environmental Protection Agency can and should protect these streams by stopping the Office of Surface Mining's plan to gut the Stream Buffer Zone rule."

"We have known for a long while that residents of West Virginia oppose mountaintop removal and are against weakening environmental laws that are meant to protect our mountains, streams, and communities from this devastation," said Margaret Janes of the Appalachian Center for the Economy and the Environment. "It is heartening to see now that many Americans across the country are aware of the enormous destruction being caused in our region and want to see an end to the practice before it is too late."

"Americans make it very clear that, despite concerns they have about the economy and our dependence on foreign oil, they do not want key environmental protections rolled back for quick, cheap energy production," said

Christine L. Matthews of Bellwether Research and Consulting. "Voters believe environmental protections - such as the Stream Buffer Zone Rule - are, in fact, beneficial to the economy, and play a critical role in protecting our water, air, and natural surroundings."

The poll results showed that:

- A majority of American voters believes the environment in the United States is deteriorating. Fully 55% say the quality of the environment has gotten worse in recent years. Another quarter believes the environment has stayed about the same and only 18 percent believe the environment has improved.

- By more than a 2:1 margin, voters believe environmental protections are good for the economy. Voters categorically reject the argument that environmental protections are bad for jobs and business a common refrain of the Bush administration, as well as oil and mining companies. A plurality (47%) believe environmental protections are good for the economy and another 23% believe such protections have no impact on the economy. Only 20% of Americans believe environmental protections are bad for the economy.

- Two-thirds of American voters oppose the Bush administration's effort to repeal the Stream Buffer Zone Rule. Fully 66% oppose repeal, including roughly half (49%) who "strongly oppose" repealing the rule, which for 25 years has protected our nation's water resources from toxic debris caused by mountaintop removal coal mining. Only two in ten (20%) support the Bush administration's effort to gut this critical safeguard (just 8% support it strongly), and another 14% are unsure.

- Opposition to Bush's effort to repeal the Stream Buffer Zone Rule is both broad and deep, transcending traditional partisan, regional, and demographic divides. Majorities of all political parties oppose repealing the rule, as do strong majorities of men (62%) and women (69%), college-educated and non college-educated voters (65% for each), and voters in all four corners of the country (74% in the Northeast, 64% in the Midwest, 64% in the South, and 64% in the West).

- Finally, voters also report high levels of concern over water quality and take a firm stand against further destruction of America's streams. Upon hearing that "more than 1,200 miles of streams in Appalachia have already been buried or destroyed by mountaintop removal coal mining, with another 1,000 miles projected for burial and destruction in the next ten years," fully 86% of voters say they are concerned about the effects of mountaintop removal, including a 60% majority who are very concerned.

For a memo detailing the survey findings, please visit:

<http://www.earthjustice.org/library/references/memo-on-mtr-poll.pdf>

For more information on the poll methodology, please visit:

<http://www.earthjustice.org/library/references/mtr-presentation.pdf>

A recorded playback of the press call is available by dialing (888) 284-7564 (reference number: 239764).