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Eminent Scientists Join Riverkeeper Effort to Prevent Coal Mines Near Birmingham Water Source

Birmingham, Ala. – Black Warrior Riverkeeper has filed public comments in an appeal of the Alabama Surface Mining Commission’s denial of its petition to designate areas near the Birmingham Water Works Board’s Mulberry Fork drinking water intake as lands unsuitable for surface coal mining. The nonprofit clean water advocacy organization’s effort to ensure clean, safe, drinkable and affordable drinking water for the Birmingham area recently gained major allies, as three nationally recognized experts on this topic submitted a joint letter in support of Black Warrior Riverkeeper’s appeal.

Dr. Emily S. Bernhardt (Associate Professor, Department of Biology and the Nicholas School of the Environment, Duke University) has researched the impact of mountaintop removal and surface mining on freshwater ecosystems of the central Appalachians. Dr. Margaret A. Palmer (Director, National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center; Professor, Department of Entomology, University of Maryland; Professor, Chesapeake Biological Laboratory, Center for Environmental Science, University of Maryland) has also studied the impacts of mountaintop removal, surface mining, and valley fill operations on aquatic ecosystems of the central Appalachians. Dr. Michael Hendryx (Professor, Applied Health Science, Indiana University; Interim Chair, Department of Health Policy, Management and Leadership, School of Public Health, West Virginia University; Research Director, Institute for Health Policy Research, West Virginia University; Director, West Virginia Rural Health Research Center) is one of the most frequently cited experts regarding coal mining’s effects on community health, having written extensively on this topic in a multitude of peer-reviewed articles.

Relying on numerous peer-reviewed studies, the scientists’ letter states that “the accumulating body of research on this topic demonstrates that surface coal mining leads to severe, persistent and far-reaching degradation of water quality and biodiversity.” They conclude that, “In short, extensive research conducted in the central Appalachians makes it very clear that there are good reasons to be concerned about the water quality implications of surface coal mines. Without similar research and evidence to the contrary, the citizens and managers of Alabama would be prudent to assume that the same trends apply.”

Riverkeeper Nelson Brooke asked the scientists to contribute research and opinion to the record for the petition. Brooke explained, “These scientists are on the cutting edge of researching coal mining’s negative impacts on water, wildlife, and human health in Appalachia, and they agree without hesitation that coal mining should not take place so close to a major drinking water source.”

Staff Attorney Eva Dillard added, “We hope that these comments by leading scientists will encourage the Alabama Surface Mining Commission to fulfill its critical role in protecting the source of our drinking water and all who rely on it.”

Black Warrior Riverkeeper petitioned the Alabama Surface Mining Commission on September 10, 2012 to designate a 40,300 acre area upstream of the Mulberry Intake as lands unsuitable for coal mining under a provision of the Alabama Surface Mining Control & Reclamation Act, which was specifically enacted to preserve public resources like drinking water. On October 28, 2013, the Alabama Surface Mining Commission refused to declare any land adjacent to the Mulberry Fork of the Black Warrior River as off limits to coal mining, missing an historic opportunity to protect the drinking water source for 200,000 residents in the greater Birmingham area.

The Birmingham Water Works Board and Black Warrior Riverkeeper each appealed the Alabama Surface Mining Commission’s decision in separate filings on November 26, 2013. Having now received public comments from Black Warrior Riverkeeper, Drs. Bernhardt, Hendryx and Palmer, and others, the Alabama Surface Mining Commission must rule on the appeal by March 31, 2014.

Drs. Bernhardt, Palmer and Hendryx’s letter: <http://www.blackwarriorriver.org/pdf/Bernhardt.et.al.to.ASMC.2.19.14.pdf>

Black Warrior Riverkeeper’s letter: <http://www.blackwarriorriver.org/pdf/BWRk.LUM.Appeal.Comments.pdf>

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[Black Warrior Riverkeeper](#)’s mission is to protect and restore the Black Warrior River and its tributaries. We are a citizen-based nonprofit organization advocating for clean water, wildlife habitat, and recreation throughout the Black Warrior River watershed.