

What Is Mountaintop Removal?

The process of mountaintop removal mining is what its name implies. Coal companies remove mountaintops in order to quickly and cheaply get to seams of coal.

There are 6 main components of the mountaintop removal process:

CLEARING — Before mining can begin, all topsoil and vegetation must be removed. Because coal companies frequently are re-

sponding to short-term fluctuations in the price

of coal, these trees are often not even used commercially

in the rush to get the coal, but instead are burned or sometimes illegally dumped into valley fills.

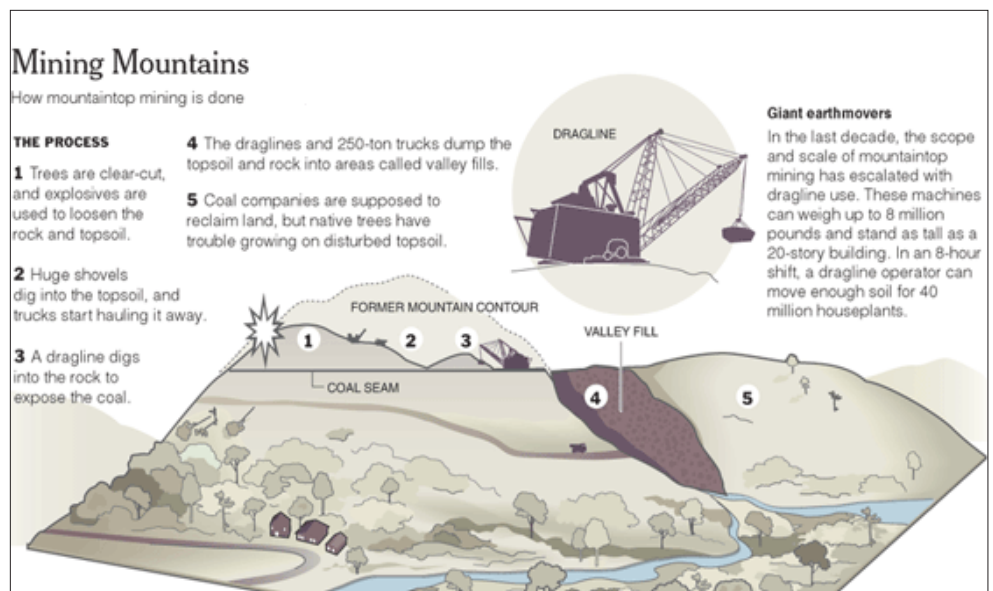
BLASTING — Many Appalachian coal seams lie deep below the surface of the mountains. Accessing these seams through surface mining can require the removal of 500-800 feet or more of elevation. This is done by blasting the mountain with dynamite. The explosives used are up to 100 times as strong as the ones used during the Oklahoma City federal building bombing.

DIGGING — Coal and debris are removed by using a dragline. A dragline stands 22 stories high and can hold 24 compact cars in its bucket.

DUMPING WASTE — The “overburden,” the coal industry’s word for the trees, rock and soil that once formed the mountaintop, is dumped over the sides and into adjacent valleys. This dumping creates “valley fills” that bury and contaminate the important headwater streams responsible for supplying clean water to much of the Eastern United States.

PROCESSING — The coal is washed and treated before it is loaded on trains. The excess water left over from this process is called “coal slurry” or “sludge” and is stored in open coal impoundments. Coal sludge is a mix of water, coal dust, clay and toxic chemicals such as arsenic mercury, lead, copper, and chromium. Impoundments are held in place by mining debris and are susceptible to leaks and breaks.

RECLAMATION — While reclamation efforts such as stabilization and revegetation are required for mountaintop removal sites in practice, state agencies that regulate mining often grant waivers. In 2005, 100% of all mountaintop removal permits issued were granted an illegal post-mining land use of “fish and wildlife.”



Adapted from an illustration originally published in the New York Times.

What does it do to the environment?

■ **It demolishes mountains**

The most obvious effect MTR has on the environment is that it forever alters the landscape by razing and leveling what used to be mountains. Close to 500 mountains have been destroyed.



KFTC member McKinley Sumner stands next to a MTR operation in Perry County, KY

■ **It buries important headwater streams**

According to OSM's own figures, 1,208 miles of streams in Central Appalachia were destroyed from 1992 to 2002 even though the federal Clean Water Act and the Surface Mining Act both clearly prohibited this. And between 2001 and 2005, government officials have given the coal industry permission to destroy an additional 535 miles of streams under 1,603 more valley fills. More than 430 miles of streams have been buried under millions of tons of waste in Kentucky.

Unfortunately, these figures seriously underestimate the total damage, as many headwater streams are not shown on the maps used by our government and they do not account for the aquatic life killed downstream.

■ **It contaminates water supplies**

MTR causes contamination of and reduction in groundwater. Heavy metals have been found in residential drinking supplies near mining sites. MTR also destroys surface and ground water quality by creating massive sediment ponds intended to contain run-off waste water. These ponds, which can become toxic soups of chemicals, regularly leak, break or overflow.

■ **It destroys forests and habitat**

MTR causes deforestation and forest fragmentation, destroys soil quality, encourages the invasion of non-native species, destroys the flow of water and nutrients to downstream areas and wipes out species that thrive in headwater streams.

What about the people who live here?

■ **Health Risks**

Water contamination from the mining process often destroys drinking water sources for residents or pollutes them with heavy metals. Blasting from the sites sometimes sends "flyrock" off the permitted mining area into residential areas, onto public roads and even through homes.

■ **Loss of Jobs & Crippled Economies**

Mountaintop removal contributes significantly to the loss of mining jobs. Substantially fewer miners are needed for this method of mining than the more traditional underground methods. It also strips local communities of the resources necessary to support alternative economic development. When the mountains are taken, ecotourism is no longer an option and regional economies based on the harvesting of ginseng, forestry and other lucrative exports are destroyed.

■ **Property Damage**

The heavy use of explosives involved with MTR mining causes extensive damage to the homes and water wells of nearby residents. The destabilization of the earth causes floods and mud slides that have damaged homes and property. As with other forms of mining, mountaintop removal creates dust, mud and noise problems in residential areas.

■ **Loss of Culture & Heritage**

MTR also has impacts that may seem less tangible unless you are a member of a community directly affected. Appalachian mountains are the center of Appalachian culture. People are displaced, family homesteads are destroyed, cemeteries are made inaccessible, the places that have helped shaped the culture are destroyed forever and a people's identity and way of life are irreversibly altered.