

P R E S S R E L E A S E

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NEW STUDY SHOWS BIRTH DEFECT RATES HIGHER NEAR MOUNTAINTOP MINING SITES

Coalfield residents and health advocates call for moratorium on MTM practices; immediate shift to safer, cleaner renewable energy

An important new study conducted by Dr. Melissa Ahern at Washington State University, Dr. Michael Hendryx and other researchers at West Virginia University finds significantly higher rates of birth defects in mountaintop removal coal mining (MTM) areas compared to non-mining areas in Appalachia, for six of seven types of defects.

Their paper, titled “The Association between Mountaintop Mining and Birth Defects among Live Births in Central Appalachia, 1996-2003” is now available online in Environmental Research on June 21, 2011.

“This study shows that places where the environment – the earth, air and water – has undergone the greatest disturbance from mining are also the places where birth defect rates are the highest,” said Dr. Ahern. “This is evidence that mountaintop mining practices may cause health impacts on people living in those areas, before they are even born.”

The study was based on analysis of over 1.8 million birth records between 1996 and 2003 in central Appalachia. Prevalence rates were higher in mountaintop mining areas compared to non-mining areas for circulatory/respiratory, central nervous system, musculoskeletal, gastrointestinal, urogenital, and ‘other’ types of defects. Spatial correlation between mountaintop mining and birth defects was also present, indicating that MTM activity in one county may have increased birth defect prevalence rates in surrounding counties.

The study showed that mountaintop removal mining effects became more pronounced in the latter years of the study (2000-2003) vs. earlier years (1996-1999).

Co-author Dr. Michael Hendryx said, “This study extends previous research on low birth weight and on adult morbidity and mortality in coal mining areas, and offers one of the first indications that health problems are disproportionately concentrated specifically in MTM areas. It’s significant not only to people who live in coalfields but to policy makers as well.”

Mountaintop removal operations are currently underway in West Virginia, Kentucky and other central Appalachian states. A 2003 Environmental Impact Statement from the EPA notes, at that point in time, an estimated 1,408,372 acres of forested land in central Appalachia have already been destroyed or were slated to be lost to mountaintop removal mining. Many coalfield residents, backed by health, environmental and faith groups have called for an end to mountaintop removal mining, citing extreme pollution, loss of communities and cultural heritage and widespread environmental destruction such as deforestation, flooding and loss of biodiversity.

“Mountaintop removal is not necessary; it destroys jobs, it destroys communities, and it is destroying human health,” said Bo Webb, who lives near a mountaintop removal site in Coal River Valley, West Virginia. “I call upon the United State Congress to immediately place a moratorium on all mountaintop mining in Appalachia.”

Health care providers in Appalachia expressed alarm at the report’s findings. “This is the most disturbing research that I’ve yet seen on the effects of mountaintop removal. It means that our mountain children are affected by the poisoned streams and polluted air even before they are born,” said Beverly May, a nurse practitioner serving in eastern Kentucky. “Our children deserve a better chance at life.”

“Governor Beshear has the power to stop, right now, these practices that are poisoning us,” May added. “I am very anxious to see if he’ll do the right thing by our children.”

Maria Gunnoe, a mother who lives near a mountaintop mining site in Boone County, WV and an organizer for the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition said, “Living at the toe of a mountaintop removal site, the impacts were clear to me years ago. This study confirms we have a problem. Yet in states like West Virginia and Kentucky our governors and federal legislators are protecting the coal industry at any cost. Shame on them for shutting us out of decisions that mean the life or death of our communities.”

“No one is going to tell me that blowing up mountains over my home is good for me,” Gunnoe added.

Deborah Payne, MPH, Energy and Health Coordinator for the Kentucky Environmental Foundation said, “We don't need coal from mountaintop removal sites in order to have electricity. The longer legislators deny that fact, the more lives are damaged and lost. Not one more child's health need be sacrificed when cleaner, renewable means of generating electricity are available.”

The paper abstract can be read at:

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0013935111001484>. To obtain a copy of the paper or to talk with the authors and other experts familiar with the work, please write amy@sciencecom.org or call Emily at 202-463-6670.

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For more information on the impacts of coal pollution and health, visit these organizations:

Coal River Mountain Watch: <http://www.crmw.org>

Kentucky Environmental Foundation: <http://www.kyenvironmentalfoundation.org>

Kentuckians For The Commonwealth: <http://www.kftc.org>

Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition: <http://www.ohvec.org>