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Study: Mining, timbering will take toll on forests in 4 states

DRAFT REPORT CITES MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL
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CHARLESTON, W.Va. - Nearly 230,000 acres of forest in West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee could be wiped out by mountaintop mining if regulations are not tightened and reclamation is not improved, a draft environmental impact study says.

When coupled with timbering, about 1 million acres of forest could be lost, said the study, which was conducted by three federal agencies (the Environmental Protection Agency, the Office of Surface Mining and the Fish and Wildlife Service) and the state Department of Environmental Protection.

The Sunday Gazette-Mail in Charleston got a copy of the draft study through the federal Freedom of Information Act. "The study results suggest that approximately 35 percent of the existing forest of the study area will remain if the future mountaintop mining and forest harvests take place," the study said. Also, miles of streams could be buried or polluted by debris from mining operations if mountaintop mining continues at its current pace, the study said.

Mountaintop mining, as defined in the study, is an operation that results in the disposal of excess rock and dirt into streams and valleys, a practice known as valley fill.

From 1985 to 1999, at least 562 miles of perennial and intermittent streams "have been lost under valley fill footprints" in Appalachia, the study said. That figure does not include ephemeral streams, those created by rain or snowmelt, because data was not available.

"Valley fills destroy stream habitats, alter stream chemistry, impact downstream transport of organic matter, and affect thermal and flow regimes available to downstream biological communities," the study said.

With the elimination of forests, mine sites will become "a mosaic of meadow, shrubland and forest patches," the study said. "Thus, the resulting landscape takes on a checkerboard pattern and habitat patches become isolated."

The amount of forest that could be lost depends on whether mountaintop mining regulations are tightened and whether companies can successfully regenerate forests on mining sites, the study said.

Timbering is projected to eliminate 770,000 acres in the four states' coalfields, but those forests are expected to regenerate faster than forests lost to mining "due to the nature of the disturbance," the study said.

The draft study, dated January 2001, is the most current version available.

An updated draft has not been completed, said Bonnie Smith, an EPA spokeswoman.

In an April 25 letter William Hoffman, acting director of the EPA Office of Environmental Programs, cautioned against drawing conclusions from the draft study. Hoffman said it would be "premature to represent these or any of the preliminary findings as the position of the agencies developing this (environmental impact study) until the studies and ... documents have undergone a thorough interagency review and concurrence process."