

Tom Fulton
Deputy Assistant Secretary for
Land and Minerals Management
Department of Interior
1849 C St., NW
MS6628-MIB
Washington, D.C. 20240
August 2, 2002

Dear Deputy Assistant Secretary Fulton:

Several representatives of the undersigned organizations agree to a meeting with the Department of Interior's Bonding Task Force on August 7th. However, we do not believe that this meeting represents an effective effort on the part of the Task Force to communicate and consult with environmental, community and other public interest groups on the critical issue of bonding. As such, with the support of the seventy-one undersigned groups, we also request that the task force hold a series of regional meetings with environmental, community conservation, taxpayer and other public interest groups on each of the three major extractive industries -- oil and gas, coal, and hardrock minerals -- to ensure that the public's interests are sufficiently considered in the task force's deliberations and reflected in its recommendations.

Our request is predicated on several key points. First, the issues surrounding financial assurances for the three industries under consideration -- hardrock minerals, coal, and oil and gas -- involve separate governing laws and regulations and different technical issues.

Second, the task force has waited four months from its inception to schedule the first meeting with public interest groups. Meanwhile, multiple meetings have been held with the surety and mining industries, starting in May, or perhaps even earlier. As a result, we are concerned that the task force's very recent decision to meet with public interest groups is an afterthought scheduled simply to enable the Department to state that it met with all stakeholders.

Third, the issue of ensuring that mining and oil and gas extraction industries pay for environmental cleanups is too critical and will affect too many citizens around the country for the task force to arbitrarily limit input from environmental, taxpayer and community groups to one session. These industries' poor track record of cleanup -- at the expense of taxpayers, the environment and the health of nearby communities -- warrants the fullest possible consultation with public interest groups that have worked on those issues.

Because of regional variances and differences in governing legislation, to be credible, the task force must hold meetings with interested environmental and community groups working on coal, oil and gas, and hard rock minerals. It is critical that the task force have meetings on each issue in different regions of the country. The task force should hold these meetings at a time and in a manner that facilitates the participation of citizens and citizen groups, and other interested parties. We recommend that the task force hold as many meetings as necessary to give public interest groups the opportunity to fully inform the task force and ensure that the process has achieved at least a balance of input between industry and public interest groups.

While we are not able to identify every group that might have valuable information to share on the issue of financing environmental cleanups, the undersigned groups -- from coastal groups in Florida to public lands groups in Wyoming and Montana -- would be interested in meeting with the task force.

In closing, we urge the task force to expand its planned consultations with public interest groups as a first, but indispensable, step toward taking a more balanced approach to this critical issue. Secretary Norton's "four C's initiative" surely does not mean consultation, cooperation, and communication only with industry. Beyond the consultation process, however, the task force will ultimately undermine the public interest unless it not only hears the points of view of affected communities, environmental groups and taxpayer groups, but also incorporates those views into its recommendations. We look forward to your prompt reply to our request.

Sincerely,

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cc: Honorable Gale Norton, Rebecca Watson, Kathleen Clarke