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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-10-21](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Surface coal mining in the mountainous areas of Appalachia—often called “mountaintop mining”—generates controversy, in part because of its scale and the post-mining appearance of the land. Yet there is limited public access to information on the size, location, and life span of these operations, or on how the land can be expected to look afterward. GAO was asked to report on the characteristics of (1) surface coal mining and (2) reclaimed lands that were disturbed by surface coal mining in the mountainous, eastern part of Kentucky and in West Virginia, where most such mining occurs.

Federal and state law requires mining operators to obtain permits before mining. Among other things, the permits identify the acres under open permit (the acres subject to mining associated with a permit that has not been closed) and how the land will be reclaimed—including the post-mining land use, whether the approximate original contour (AOC) of the land will be restored, and the extent to which excess earth, rock, and other materials (known as “spoil”) are placed in nearby valleys. For this study, GAO relied on electronic databases of mining permits maintained by Kentucky and West Virginia. This report makes no recommendations. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Department of the Interior and the two state mining agencies generally agreed with our findings.

[View GAO-10-21](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Robin Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

SURFACE COAL MINING

Characteristics of Mining in Mountainous Areas of Kentucky and West Virginia

What GAO Found

Surface coal mining in Kentucky and West Virginia had the following important characteristics, based on permits issued from January 1990 through July 2008:

- The number of acres under open permit increased by an average annual rate of 2.2 percent in Kentucky and 1.7 percent in West Virginia.
- The number of acres under open permit became more geographically concentrated.
- The length of time that permits were open varied from less than a year to more than 18 years.
- In West Virginia, 28 contiguously permitted areas contained nearly half of the permitted acres, as of July 2008.

Reclaimed lands had the following important characteristics, based on permits issued from January 2000 through July 2008:

- The most common type of post-mining land use in Kentucky was fish and wildlife habitat and, in West Virginia, it was forestland.
- Most permits required operators to reclaim the land to AOC, but there were some exceptions (called variances). Most of the variances were for lands where there was insufficient spoil to restore AOC because the land had been previously mined but not reclaimed.
- Kentucky and West Virginia collectively approved nearly 2,000 fills to store at least 4.9 billion cubic yards of excess spoil in nearby valleys.

A West Virginia site showing the bare soil of active mining and the greener land that is being reclaimed



Source: GAO.