

## **Castle Mountain Coalition and coal mining in Chickaloon**

In January 2007, a group of Matanuska Valley residents joined together to form the Castle Mountain Coalition (CMC). The mission of this new nonprofit is to promote and preserve ecological integrity, economic sustainability, and quality of life within the Matanuska River watershed. Its founders and rapidly growing body of supporters share a common concern. We are tired of the persistent efforts of outside interests to exploit the natural resources of the Matanuska River valley – including the Sutton-Glennallen intertie, the ANGDA gas spur line from Glennallen to Palmer, and the many Glenn Highway realignments. We are tired of reacting to ill-conceived projects, and we have decided the time has come to take a more proactive approach to protecting this special place for generations to come.

The story of the latest threat to this beautiful valley began in the fall of 2005, when the Alaska Mental Health Trust Land Office (MHTLO) proposed a lease offering of 16,500 acres in Chickaloon. This came to the community's attention in early October 2005, when a local resident happened to see the lease notification in the *Frontiersman* legal notices. The MHTLO did not notify the Chickaloon Community Council or any adjacent landowners of the lease offering. In December 2005, the community council passed a resolution requesting suspension of the coal lease offering until there was an accurate best interest decision that included public participation, with assessment of economic, social, and environmental impacts, land uses, and consistency with the Chickaloon Comprehensive Plan. The community council received no response from MHTLO to its letter and accompanying resolution. The MHTLO went forward with the coal lease, offering over 30,000 acres of MHT subsurface lands in April of 2006. The sole bidder Full Metal Minerals LLC from Vancouver, BC was awarded the lease for \$4 an acre on approximately 21,000 acres. After repeated requests for a meeting, representatives from the MHTLO, DNR Division of Mining, and Full Metal Minerals (FMM) gave a presentation at a community council in August 2006. Rob McLeod of FMM assured those present his company would not pursue exploration against the wishes of the community.

On October 1, 2006, the coal lease between MHTLO and FMM went into effect. The January 10, 2007 coal exploration permit application prepared by Alaska Earth Sciences, Inc. for FMM and submitted to the DNR, Division of Mining, Land and Water is currently open to public review and comment. The original comment period was slated to end February 12. This deadline has been extended to February 28, due in large part a meeting held in the Chickaloon Community Center on February 7. The Chickaloon Community Center was packed beyond capacity, with many people leaving when they could not get in. Those in attendance heard two hours of eloquent and impassioned testimony, covering an extensive range of concerns about the proposed exploration and extraction of coal in the Chickaloon area.

While DNR's directive is to ensure the permittee does things right, many of those testifying were more concerned that MHTLO and Full Metal Minerals do the right thing. This picture does not include the regressive step of re-opening to coal mining an area that has still not fully recovered from the effects of the mining that occurred more than 80 years ago. The point was made that the government turned that land back into private ownership and allowed the community to grow in the ensuing decades. Recent reports confirm the human activity of burning of fossil fuels is a major contributing factor to climate change, and efforts should be invested in developing alternate sources of power. Yet MEA is even now in the process of planning a coal-burning power station.

Comments important to the exploration plan and the DNR permit:

- In 2005, the public was asked to comment on a 16,500 lease. The sale was then amended to include an additional 14,000 acres, and the public was not allowed to comment on this acreage. In the exploration plan, three different lease sizes are referenced: 21,019, 22,625, and (can't find third).
- More than 15,000 acres of state-owned surface lands are impacted by this lease- lands designated for wildlife habitat and recreation in the Matanuska Valley Moose Range Plan.
- Residential roads and recreational trails will be used to access the lease area.
- The route of the proposed gas spur line is incorrectly depicted in the permit application.
- The lease acreage includes lands excluded to mineral extraction by the Matanuska Valley Moose Range Plan.
- Some of the acreage falls within the purview of the Coastal Zone Management Plan and should automatically trigger a review by several agencies that have yet to be included - Alaska Department of Fish and Game has now just learned of this coal lease.
- The Chickaloon Special Land Use District requires a conditional use permit for drilling activities.
- The Glenn Highway corridor is designated a National Scenic Byway – the coal lease borders both sides of the highway near King Mountain for approximately 3 miles.
- The proposed routes used to access drill site will open up the area to recreational traffic and have a devastating impact on its wildlife and the peaceful community of Chickaloon.
- The lease area is an important migratory corridor for raptors, waterfowl, sand hill cranes and other birds. It is important moose, brown bear and black bear habitat.
- Environmental impacts could potentially affect the Matanuska River watershed all the way to Palmer.
- Coal truck traffic will affect all residents along the transportation route.

Surely the “highest and best use of the Mental Health Trust land is to capitalize on its natural beauty and recreation potential - not destroy the land and community in the sake of the almighty dollar.



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