



U.S. Congressman
Nick Rahall
WORKING FOR WEST VIRGINIANS

**Earth Day 1990 Commentary
U.S. REP. NICK J. RAHALL**

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"A NEW CONSERVATION ETHIC FOR WEST VIRGINIA"

The original Earth Day in 1970 fostered a greater awareness within the Nation of our fragile environment. As a result, the Clean Water Act was strengthened. The Clean Air Act was enacted. And, a whole host of other measures followed aimed at protecting the environment, such as those dealing with toxic, hazardous and nuclear wastes, land use management, threatened and endangered species and the regulation of surface coal mining.

In West Virginia we have made strides to improve our environment under these federal laws, as have others throughout the country. However, on Earth Day 1990, I think we should rededicate ourselves to the continuing and pressing need for a clean environment by adopting a new conservation ethic tailored to our particular circumstances and the type of future we hope to leave to generations of West Virginians to come.

If we are to prosper and diversify in West Virginia, we must begin today to nurture and preserve West Virginia's real wealth; our rich natural heritage embodied by our majestic hills and hollows, free-flowing streams, luxuriant forest stands and vast array of fish and wildlife species. As the history of our State clearly shows us, natural resource development alone--such as mining and timbering--do not make an economy, or a people, complete. On this day, I am issuing a conservation call to arms to all West Virginians.

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It has been said that in West Virginia we can only prosper when a commodity is extracted or removed from the State, be it coal, timber, oil and natural gas. The exploitation of our natural resource wealth began in the last century. Discovering rich reserves of coal, railroads and absentee corporate interests purchased vast tracts of land and leased them for development.

The abuses of this era resulted in adverse effects on the quality of our environment from which we are still recovering today. In the coalfields of West Virginia, the proliferation of acidified streams, highwalls, refuse piles, open mine shafts and other hazards associated with past coal mining practices continue to threaten the health and safety of citizens. In our forest lands, massive clearcuts denuded entire areas giving rise to soil erosion and the loss of wildlife habitat.

Even today, when people speak of economic development, we are still tied to some degree to the past in our thinking. To prosper is to increase our timber harvest, open a new coal mine, or build a new factory. I am a promoter of economic development initiatives. We must have mining, it provides employment and the Nation needs coal to generate the electricity on which we all depend. So, too, must we have other development activities which affect the environment. Our standard of living depends upon the manufacturing of chemicals, steel and wood products.

But, I am also a strong advocate of ethical resource development; the enforcement of sound mining and timber harvesting practices and compliance with environmental, health and safety standards. This should be part of our conservation ethic.

Moreover, we must realize that we can prosper, and enjoy economic benefits, through the conservation of our natural heritage as well. We are a State blessed with areas that represent significant and outstanding historic, cultural, wildlife, scenic and recreational values. Let us set these areas aside and preserve their values. This, too, should be part of our conservation ethic.

I believe that today, more than ever before in the history of our State, we must move toward the implementation of a well-balanced policy governing our rich natural heritage. We must recognize both development and conservation needs. With proper management, they can coexist. Both contribute to our economy and are essential to the public interest.

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Under a conservation call to arms, on this Earth Day 1990, we should examine our environment and mobilize through grassroots forces to bring about a new conservation ethic in our State.

Today, I am calling on West Virginians, all of us, to recommit ourselves to take action against the trash that litters our countryside. It is a blight upon our landscape. It befouls our rivers and streams. It is the single most pressing environmental problem we face in our State. To alleviate it we do not require subsidies or new programs. All we need is the fortitude and the will to overcome adversity that is characteristic to the people of West Virginia.

In addition:

We must demand safe drinking water for all West Virginians, and sanitary sewage disposal systems to serve all of our communities.

We must insure the enforcement of those laws aimed at protecting people and the environment from the potential adverse effects of mining, timbering and other developmental activities that can impact our land and water resources.

We must move to enhance our fish and wildlife resources by deacidifying our streams and providing suitable habitat.

We must reclaim our land, bring it back to productive uses, and obliterate the threats to coalfield residents from abandoned coal mine lands.

As West Virginians, we should expect, and we deserve, no less from our State and Federal governments, and from ourselves.

At stake, is our quality of life. Moreover, how we manage our natural resources and our natural heritage today will dictate the type of legacy we will leave to our children and to future generations.

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