

Mountaintop removal foes try new strategy

Businesses told of chamber's stance

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Mountaintop removal has been a major issue in the state for years. Environmentalists are trying a new tack. / Shelley Mays / File / Tennessean

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Conservationists stymied for several years in efforts to pass a bill to ban the dynamiting of Tennessee’s ridgetops for coal have taken a new tack.

They wrote to Nissan, Gaylord Entertainment, TVA, FedEx, the University of Tennessee and a slough of other members of the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce & Industry, asking if they know about the chamber’s “ardent opposition” to the bill.

The conservationists appealed to the fact that many of the chamber supporters promote care for the environment.

“It is our belief that you will be troubled to learn that your membership dues are used to lobby against Tennessee’s mountains,” said the

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letter from Mary Helen Clarke, board president of the Tennessee Conservation Voters, a nonpartisan, statewide coalition of 24 organizations.

“Together, we can help Tennessee make a better choice on this important economic development issue.”

She said that for five years the chamber has been a primary opponent of the bill, called the Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act.

Bill Ozier, an attorney with Bass, Berry & Sims and chairman of the chamber board, is among those who received the letter.

“The board has not really looked at it to take a position since 2009,” he said. “The chamber felt the compromise passed in 2009 addressed the issue.”

A key provision in that bill added a 100-foot buffer around streams to try to guard them from mining operations. Conservationists, while they wanted a buffer, didn’t view the bill as a substitute. The scenic vistas legislation, [Senate Bill 0577](#), is on the agenda at 10:30 a.m. today of the [Senate Environment and Energy Committee](#) at Legislative Plaza.

Ozier said the chamber is focused on achieving a balance between business and the environment, adding that the chamber and most businesses are looking for a way to serve both interests.

“Clearly the chamber supports the environment and protecting the scenic beauty of Tennessee,” he said.

He said he asked the chamber’s president to gather more information on the issue.

The Tennessee Conservation Voters said the chamber’s lobbying raises questions about its real priorities. “A lot of Tennessee’s top employers in the state are members of the chamber, and a lot of them are doing really great work around the issue of sustainability and being stewards of our resources,” said TCV board member Shelby White.

“We just want to make sure those companies involved in that type of work know what their chamber is doing.”

The chamber has worked to cut off almost every major environmental bill that advocates have proposed over the past four years. They have included bills related to landfills, radioactive waste, bottle deposits and genetically altered seeds.

The proposal about the blasting off of mountain ridges is the only one mentioned in the conservationist group’s letter.

Effect on jobs

In its *Business Insider* newsletter last year, the chamber wrote about legislation it killed that year, saying jobs have been saved as a result.

“For example,” the [summer 2011 publication](#) said, “the Chamber outright defeated or delayed several bills that would have severely limited coal mining and therefore driven up energy costs while eliminating Tennesseans’ jobs.”

White said the Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act is not an anti-coal measure. The bill applies to how coal is mined above 2,000 feet and limits only one method of high-elevation mining.

Blowing up ridges to reach a seam of coal is too harmful to the environment, which is a problem for tourism and health, the group says. Selenium, mercury, arsenic and other potentially toxic materials are released into the air and watersheds in the explosions.

Fewer rather than more jobs in the coal industry result, too, the group says.

“We see this as a jobs bill,” White said. “It takes fewer and fewer miners to blow up a mountain. Traditional mining jobs are being replaced by explosives and earth-moving equipment.”

Since 1985, the mining workforce has dropped by 85 percent while production of coal from strip mining has grown by 44 percent, he said.

Only a tiny amount of coal is produced in Tennessee — less than 0.1 percent of the country’s coal, according to a report, [Coal and Renewables in Central Appalachia](#), by Downstream Strategies and West Virginia Center on Budget & Policy. Most of the state’s coal mining, which provides about 550 mining jobs, does not involve ridgetop removal, it said.

Chuck Laine, president of the Tennessee Mining Association, said it’s a property rights issue, for one, and questioned if the groups are trying to “mask a bill that does away with coal mining.”

“We don’t blow the tops of mountains off in Tennessee,” said Laine, a chamber member, who said crests and ridges are taken off.

“If and when we do, we put the mountain back to the original contour. We put the trees back. That’s the only way you can mine that coal.”

The coal at higher elevations is better quality and more valuable, he said. Plus, many indirect jobs result.

As to any health or environmental problems, he said that state and federal agencies monitor mining so that it meets standards.

FedEx spokeswoman Deborah Willig said Tuesday afternoon that she had not reached the company’s chamber representative, but a

Barbara Martocci, with the Tennessee Valley Authority, did not address TVA’s membership in the chamber and its lobbying. She emailed a statement saying TVA was awaiting a federal environmental report related to mountaintop removal.

Gaylord Entertainment did not provide a comment Tuesday. Katherine Zachary, with Nissan, said the chamber hadn’t asked her company about lobbying on the issue and that Nissan believes “strongly in protecting the environment and our natural resources.”

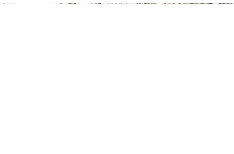
Hank Dye, with the University of Tennessee, said the letter would require close scrutiny and that he had no comment on Tuesday.

A UT senior said she was proud of her school’s support of clean energy by investing in the Green Power Switch program, but she was disappointed in its involvement with the chamber.

“I would urge the university to cut its ties with the chamber because they’re undermining a clean, sustainable economy in our state,” said Maria Rosales, who is with Students Promoting Environmental Action in Knoxville and is an intern at the Southern Energy Network.

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