

Political polarization has gotten to the point where there would be immediate denunciations if the President issued a proclamation honoring apple pie. Another intrusion into consumer choice, besmirching those who prefer cherry and pumpkin! Another blatant overreach by an out-of-control, incipient tyrant! Not only is every executive action accompanied by loud resistance, but the same explosion of outrage comes with every presidential action, major or minor, knockout punch or paper-cut.

The proposed stream buffer rule is a case in point. It places some relatively mild restrictions on mountaintop mining. Dumping is prohibited within a hundred feet of a stream, but there's an exception for cases where this is a hardship. The proposed rule has some other requirements for water quality monitoring, a bond to cover restoration costs, and a mandate to restore water quality in streams when the mining is done. EPA estimates the costs on industry and the loss of jobs as small. Environmentalists are complaining that the proposal won't actually make a dent in the practice of destroying mountains in order to extract coal.

I guess it isn't surprising that the industry is resisting this regulation, which will require some additional costs. Maybe they're even right that the proposal is a bad idea. But still, it doesn't look like all that big a deal. You wouldn't know that, however, from the screams of outrage from politicians. Senator Manchin says it will devastate local economics.

McConnell says it's "aimed squarely at the lifeblood" of families. Indeed, he says, "it's impossible not to conclude that the Obama administration is engaging in all-out economic warfare on these communities," "It's no secret that this overreaching rule is designed to help put coal country out of business," says Senator Barrasso.

So what's going on here? Why the panic over a minor league rule?

Well, first of all, as McConnell indicates, it fits into a narrative they've already got going about the war on coal. Second, there's the constant competition for the news cycle, especially for coverage on Fox News. Third, there's the competition for campaign contributions from the industry in question. And finally, some of these people just seem to panic at the drop of a hat.

In short, this a rule that sounds like it's designed to improve water quality, perhaps modestly, which after all is EPA's assignment under the Clean Water Act. Maybe it's a good rule, maybe not. But we're not talking Armageddon here.

Seriously folks. Get a grip.

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