

Professor Squillace Testifies before Congress on Coal Mine Methane and Uranium Leasing on Public Lands

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Professor Mark Squillace testified yesterday before the House Resources Committee on two provisions of the Consolidated Land, Energy, and Aquatic Resources Act of 2009. The first would amend the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920 to give federal coal lessees ownership of the embedded natural gas. In exchange, the lessee would be obligated to develop the methane rather than venting it into the atmosphere if it is feasible to do so. “I was especially proud to testify about the methane provision,” remarked Professor Squillace, “because the proposed statutory language was largely based upon a proposal that I drafted for the Committee.” The venting of methane at underground coal mines poses a serious environment problem because methane is a potent greenhouse gas—about 23 times stronger than CO₂. “A single underground coal mine in Colorado, for example, vents enough methane to heat nearly 50,000 homes a year, and emits the equivalent of about 3% of the CO₂ emitted from all of the power plants in Colorado,” noted Professor Squillace.

Professor Squillace also testified in favor of a provision that would remove uranium from the General Mining Law of 1872 and place it under the Mineral Leasing Act. The uranium leasing proposal is important because it would give the U.S. Department of the Interior discretion to decide where and how uranium development is going to occur. Many of these new claims are located on fragile lands on the Colorado Plateau. Controversy over new uranium claims erupted last year due to the proximity of many of these new claims to the Grand Canyon. “Given the special risks associated with developing radioactive materials like uranium, it makes sense to have the government deciding where and how mining will occur,” Squillace commented.