Guest Columns

Coal review good news for ski tourism

By Neal King / Mayor, Taos Ski Valley

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In January, the Interior Department announced a comprehensive review of the federal coal program – the first major overhaul in three decades – which puts a pause on new significant leases on federal lands, and includes important reforms to increase transparency. The positive impacts of this long-overdue review will be felt throughout New Mexico in myriad ways.

Every year thousands flock to the Sangre de Cristo mountain range to ski the world-class terrain of Taos Ski Valley. At 9,200 feet in elevation, our base area is home to over 40 merchants who depend on the area’s tourists to operate their dining, lodging, retail and sports establishments. This tight-knit community has seen many changes in recent years under the leadership of new owner Louis Bacon, bringing this mom and pop resort into the modern area.

Yet despite recent investments in the future of this destination ski area, a looming threat to our tourism-based local economy remains.

Across the globe, rising temperatures are rapidly changing mountain regions. Increased risk and severity of wildfires and decreased snowpack could wreak havoc on ski towns and alpine communities like Taos Ski Valley.

The outdoor recreation economy, particularly in areas dependent on winter snow sports, is bearing the brunt of being forced to front the growing financial costs of adapting to climate change, and our state is already feeling the impact. Mountain climates are drier and seeing less snowfall. Rising global temperatures are expected to cost New Mexico $3.2 billion annually while lost recreation opportunities could account for $286 million in lost revenue to the state.

In Summit County, Utah, the 15 percent projected decrease in snowpack is predicted to result in 1,137 lost jobs and $20.4 million in the form of lost earnings. In 2002, Colorado lost an estimated $1 billion in revenue and 3,000 jobs as a result of drought conditions. And Washington State’s fire suppression costs will increase over 50 percent by 2020 and over 100 percent by 2040, raising the expenses to $93 million and $124 million respectively.

And as the financial burden of climate change has risen, coal companies have continued to profit, allowed to avoid paying a fair return rate on coal extracted from taxpayer-owned lands. Companies have deprived taxpayers their share of the revenues (more than $1 billion a year) that should be going to schools and roads across the country.

This is why the reforms announced by the Obama Administration are so critical: not only will they help ensure that our mining process is more ecologically responsible, but will also restore transparency and accountability to
an outdated, broken program that has cost taxpayers billions in revenue.

Modernizing federal coal represents a pivotal time in American history and presents us with the critical opportunity to ease the financial burden of mountain communities faced with fronting the significant monetary cost of climate change.

Mountain areas throughout the West have united on this issue, sending letters to the Interior Department and the Bureau of Land Management. Last August, Taos Ski Valley’s Village Administrator Mark G. Fratrick testified in front of BLM Director Neil Kornze, recommending that the costs of climate change to communities like ours be incorporated into the return rate on the federal coal program. The administration’s announcement proves our message has been heard.

As the comprehensive reform of the federal coal program begins, the Interior Department will be soliciting public input through a series of listening sessions to be held in May and June in Casper, Wyo.; Grand Junction, Colo.; Knoxville, Tenn.; Pittsburgh, Pa.; Salt Lake City, and Seattle. I thank the Interior Department for their dedication to this process, and Sen. Martin Heinrich and Sen. Tom Udall for supporting these common-sense reforms.

And I encourage you to join the Village of Taos Ski Valley in supporting the Interior Department as it pushes through strong reforms in its final year.

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