

'21st century fuel'



WILLIAM WOODY/The Daily Sentinel

A MINER INSPECTS a section of reinforced roof in the Oxbow Mining LLC Elk Creek mine in Somerset in early December. The Oxbow mine is one of the largest underground coal mines in America and boasts the highest quality coal in terms of burning and heat generation. The company's coal is shipped by train to power plants across the country. See a slide show and a video at GJSentinel.com.

PLENTY YET TO BE MINED FROM THE UINTA REGION

By GARY HARMON
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Old coal mines dot the route along Energy Alley from Green River, Utah, to Rifle, from small holes punched into the Bookcliffs overlooking the Grand Valley to the closed Roadside Mine in De Beque Canyon.

North of Grand Junction, miners are digging into the Bookcliffs at the McClane Canyon Mine, hauling 280,000 tons a year out to Cameo Station to fire turbines that generate electricity.

Central Appalachian Mining, which also owns McClane Canyon Mine, is planning to dig a larger mine nearby, the Red Cliffs Mine, where output would dwarf that of McClane Canyon Mine.

To the south, mines in Delta and Gunnison counties produced nearly half of the 32 million tons of coal produced annually in Colorado.

All the coal being pulled from Mesa, Delta, Garfield and Gunnison counties, however, represents a mere scratch on the surface of what is known as the Uinta coal region. One estimate says the region has 23 billion tons of prehistoric organic material squeezed under millions of tons of soil and rock, deep below the arid, desolate landscape.

Of the 23 billion tons of coal, it appears less than half, about 11 billion tons, eventually can be mined, Colorado State Geologist Vince Matthews said.

Dismissed by critics as a dirty fuel that no longer fits into the nation's energy needs, coal nevertheless remains a staple of the nation's energy appetite, Matthews said. Although it's the focus of debate around the world, coal generates more than half the nation's electricity, according to the Energy Information Administration.

"It's not a 19th century fuel," Matthews said. "It's a 20th and 21st century fuel."

Colorado exports much of the coal it produces, sending 22 million tons out of state, according to the Colorado Mining Association.

The demand for Colorado coal has largely been driven by the need for what is known as "compliance coal." Its low-sulfur content has made it attractive as a feedstock for eastern power plants operating under tight air-pollution rules, Matthews said. Cleaner-burning western coal is mixed with eastern coal to comply with clean-air regulations.

Colorado overall is the nation's seventh-largest coal

ENERGY SERIES: DAY 6

The Daily Sentinel is taking an eight-day look at the remarkably diverse range of energy sources — uranium, coal, natural gas, methane, alternative energy and oil shale — found along a 150-mile stretch of Interstate 70 that has the makings of the nation's Energy Alley.

producer, and it has the largest reserves of bituminous "compliance coal" in the country.

The Red Cliff Mine, which would be dug into the Bookcliffs north of Loma off Colorado Highway 139, could increase Colorado's coal production by 6 million to 8 million tons a year, or as much as 25 percent, for 30 years.

Rhino Energy, owned by Central Appalachian Mining, is working on an environmen-

tal impact statement for about 6,000 acres where it hopes to win a lease to mine. Rhino also hopes eventually to mine underneath 23,000 acres adjacent to the 6,000 acres.

Production, though, remains a long way off.

"If we can get to the (first) lease sale by 2011, I'll feel pretty good about that," said Corey Heaps, project manager for Red Cliff Mine.

At full operation, Rhino Energy says, Red Cliff Mine would operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and employ as many as 200 people.

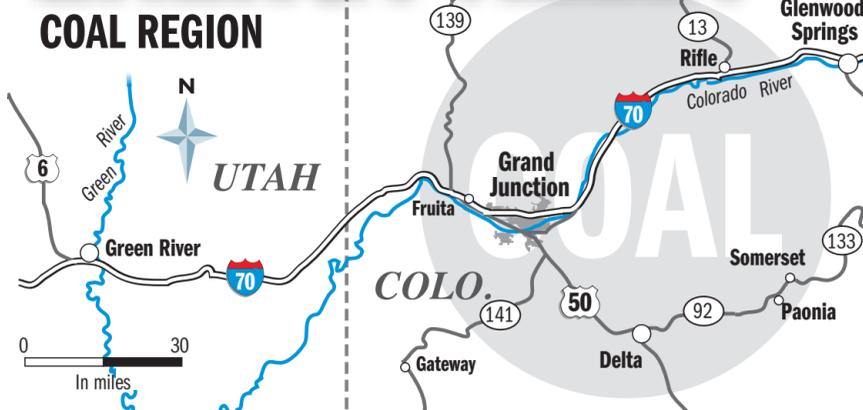
It's also being watched by the Colorado Environmental Coalition, which doesn't want the mine to intrude on a proposed wilderness area in nearby Hunter Canyon or other views of the area.



WILLIAM WOODY/The Daily Sentinel

OXBOW MINER Mike Synder stands for a portrait following his afternoon shift at the Elk Creek mine in Somerset in early December. Go to GJSentinel.com for a slide show of miner portraits.

ENERGY ALLEY



ROBERT GARCÍA/The Daily Sentinel

Local mines help supply half of nation's electricity

By DENNIS WEBB
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SOMERSET — Two thousand feet underground and two and a half miles within a tunnel into a mountain, Ed Pagone turned a corner and made a pronouncement.

"This here is the money maker. This here is the bread and butter. This is the longwall," Pagone said to a visitor. It sounded like a dramatic introduction, but it was fitting for what was a drama-filled scene. For around that corner, a menacing machine called a shearer was advancing along an 800-foot corridor and grinding 30 inches away from a wall of coal. Its efforts were allowing as much as 1,500 to 1,700 tons per hour of the glistening black mineral — sprayed with water to control dust — to be sent to the surface along a conveyor belt that roared like a train.

"The longwall pays the bills," James Cooper, president of Oxbow Mining LLC, had said earlier about this contraption, which is responsible for 80 percent of coal production at Oxbow's Elk Creek Mine operations in the coal mining town of Somerset in Gunnison County.

As the 68-ton, carbide-tipped shearer swept back and forth across the corridor's face, it became plain to see how it was capable of eating into the wall at a pace of 50 to 60 feet per day.

Its mere vibration caused coal chunks to fall as if in fear several feet before it reached them. As the shearer advanced, 139 longwall shields, each held up by two pistons taller than a person, slid 30 inches forward one by one. The shields provided overhead support and protection for the nine or 10 miners collecting coal from the newly grinded face. The earthen roof behind them collapsed as they and the machine proceeded farther into the coal seam, creating yet another cavity.

An occasional ground-shaking "bump," as Pagone called it, signaled the earth releasing pressure as the slow erasure of the coal seam continued.

The longwall, the center of this mine's operation, also is the first step in a process that helps contribute to a national coal supply providing about half of America's electricity. Oxbow miners and officials wonder how many people stop to think about that, at a time when some denigrate coal as a dirty fuel source contributing to climate change.

"We're prejudiced, but right now we think the coal industry is under a public siege as far as public opinion and public reputation," Cooper said. "Today, if the United States wants to do without coal, they're going to have to turn off a lot of lights and other things."

Pat Smuin, a section foreman, paused from helping open a new section of the mine for a longwall operation to talk about coal miners' work in helping provide what he said is an affordable energy source.

"I think we work hard for the product we produce," he said. "... It's tough conditions, it's a tough lifestyle, but I think we all take a lot of pride in what we do."

Together in 2008, the 1,000 or so workers in the Elk Creek, Bowie No. 2 and West Elk mines of the North Fork Valley were responsible for producing about 14 million of the 32.4 million tons of coal produced in the state.

For Somerset, coal mining is a tradition that dates back to 1896, as a sign at the entrance to the unincorporated community of around 100 homes proclaims. It's bound not only by mountains on each side of a narrow valley, but by the overhead conveyor systems, silos, rail-

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road tracks and other external reminders of the mines that plumb the interior of those mountains.

As in other coal-producing regions, the community's relationship with the industry is a conflicted one, marked by a history of mine fatalities and labor battles, but also an appreciation for the jobs the industry creates for people in and around Somerset and the other economic benefits of mining.

Harold Mlakar Jr.'s dad worked in the mines for 40 years, and the younger Mlakar also did for a few years before calling it quits due to back problems.

"I don't think you could drag me back in one. I love the mines, though," Mlakar said as he paid a visit to Somerset's Loose Moose Saloon.

"I've seen too much of the bad stuff," he said, thinking back to fatal cave-ins and other mine incidents.

At the same time, Mlakar appreciates the coal the mines produce.

"I'd get cold in the winter without it," said Mlakar, who heats his home with coal.

And when asked about the coal dust that stains the sidings of homes — which prompted another Somerset resident to complain to a reporter without