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The land speaks volumes

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By: **Ron Harper**, Bismarck

I read with interest the letter by Wayne Fisher regarding the North Dakota Public Service Commission's oversight of surface mining. While I cannot personally address the proposed mine at South Heart, N.D., I can assure you the PSC, the state's utilities and mining companies are indeed proactive in protecting the land and the residents of this state.

Coal mining reclamation has been required by law since 1970. In Basin Electric's instance, we were the first utility in the nation to require it of our fuel suppliers starting in the 1960s – long before the law required. In 1967, the members of Basin Electric affirmed this decision in their Ideals and Objectives: "The energy industry must do all that is feasible to minimize the negative impacts on the environment." We've lived this commitment for five decades because it's the right thing to do.

With the state's long mining history, there are instances where no entity remains to fund reclamation of mines abandoned many decades ago. The PSC's Abandoned Mine Lands Division eliminates hazardous conditions at these areas. This is funded by federal fees paid by active mining operations like The Coteau Properties Co.'s Freedom Mine that supplies lignite coal to our North Dakota facilities. Since operations began in 1983, Basin Electric has paid, through the cost of coal, more than \$34 million into this federal fund for abandoned mine reclamation. That accounts for more than 9 cents in cost per ton of producing lignite.

Additionally, Coteau is required to reclaim all lands it disturbs in the mining process. The expenses required to reclaim these mined lands are also included in the cost of producing lignite at the Freedom Mine. Through 2010, the Freedom Mine has reclaimed 13,285 acres. Ultimately, these reclamation costs are paid by Basin Electric's rural electric customers through the price they pay for electricity.

When the last ton of lignite has been mined at the Freedom Mine, the reclamation liability will continue for many years. Basin Electric and its members have chosen to establish a fund that will provide for the millions of dollars needed to meet the regulatory requirements for final reclamation and closure of the Freedom Mine.

If words and data are not proof enough, take a drive along Highway 200. Start at Beulah and take note of the PSC's work to fill in collapsing turn-of-the-century underground mines. Immediately east of town, the spoil piles from a mid-century surface mine have been seeded into wildlife-friendly woodlands. Nearby, an old open pit is now a wetland with nesting areas. Travel farther east to Stanton and look south: rolling hills and prairie grass where Basin Electric's Glenharold Mine was once active.

North Dakota's landscape speaks volumes of what the PSC, mining companies and utilities have done for the state: They foster sound environmental stewardship and prosperous economic development.

Harper is CEO/general manager of Basin Electric Power Cooperative, Bismarck.

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