

What Goes Around Comes Around: The Reopening of Westland No. 2 Mine

By Bob Ciminel - Montour Railroad Historical Society

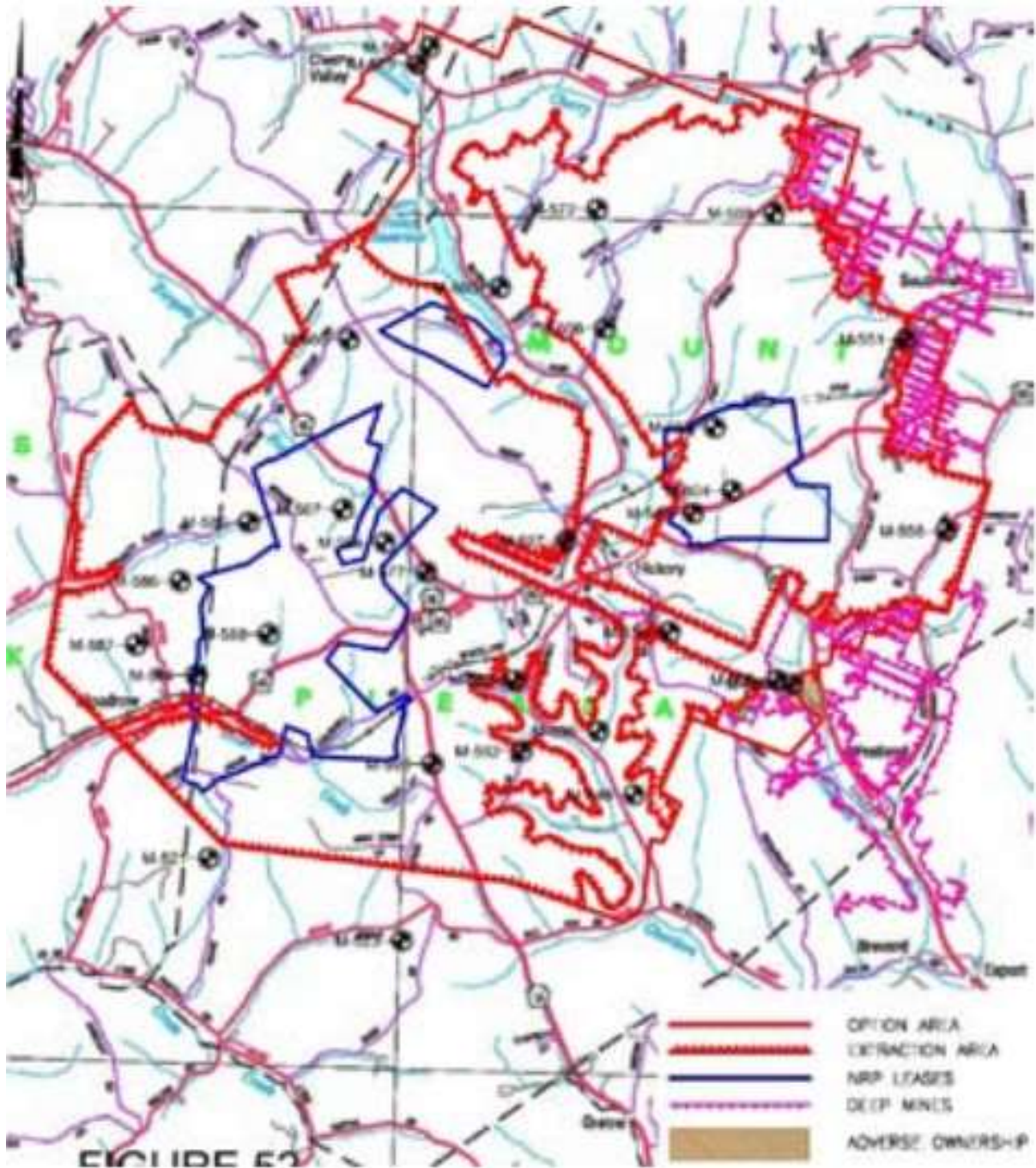
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It was only a year ago that we covered the Westland mine and how its shutdown spelled the end of the Montour Railroad and the beginning of the Montour Trail (Vol. 21, #4). Earlier this year, we announced the rebirth of the Montour's Westland Branch to provide rail service to the Mark West natural gas processing plant on Route 519 between Houston and Westland (Vol. 22, #1).

Suffice to say we were totally amazed this past June to learn that Mount Pleasant Township approved the necessary zoning changes to reopen the Westland No. 2 mine. It has indeed been an interesting year for the Montour Railroad fans and Montour Trail users.

Although the chain of ownership is extremely complicated, Wilson Creek Energy LLC (a subsidiary of Canadian-owned Corsa Coal Corporation) wants to mine and market the almost 110 million tons of high volatile bituminous coal remaining in the ground north and west of Westland. The project is called the Pittsburgh-Kovalchik Underground Mine. Mr. Joe Kovalchik, the scrap dealer from Indiana, PA, who saved the East Broad Top narrow gauge railroad in Orbisonia, PA, owns the former Westland No. 2 mine site. Although most of the reserves have too high a sulfur content for use as metallurgical coal for coking, about 14 million tons of recoverable low-sulfur coal does exist in the area to the west of Westland.

At this point we don't know if the new mine at Westland No. 2 will have any effect on the new Westland Branch, but railroad aficionados clearly see that moving coal by rail would be safer, cheaper, and have less environmental impact than the estimated 170 coal trucks per day rolling down Route 519 through Houston to reach I-79. A 100-ton capacity coal car can carry the same amount of coal as four tandem-axle coal trucks. It is about 80 miles by road between Westland and Wilson Creek's preparation plant in Somerset; however, that does not preclude shipping Westland coal to nearby preparation plants and power plants.



Given the numerous restrictions (18 at last count) Mount Pleasant Township placed on the new coal mine; it is not surprising that Wilson Creek Energy is exploring the possibility of constructing a spur from the new Westland Branch to the mine. Consolidation Coal constructed 6,000 feet of narrow-gauge track and built two trestles over Sabo Road and Route 519 to bring coal from Westland No. 2 to the tipple at Westland No. 1 for loading onto Montour Railroad trains and a trip to the Champion coal washer.

The Township's approval of the new mine is surprising for many reasons; the first being that it represents a complete about-face in attitudes toward mining at Westland. In 1979, township supervisors disapproved Consolidation Coal's request to re-zone 50

acres of land along Washington Avenue near Route 50 in Hickory to allow construction of a new shaft. Westland No. 2 had reached a point approximately 1/2 mile south of the proposed location for the new shaft and Consolidation wanted to create a new portal and fan to improve ventilation, reduce the travel time miners needed to reach the working face, and most importantly, provide an alternate escape route in the event of problems in the mine. The board of supervisors voted against the zoning change on the grounds that it might prove “detrimental to the health, welfare and safety” of the township residents (who obviously were not coal miners!). Within six years, Westland No. 2 was closed, sealed, and abandoned.

The new Westland No. 2 will be a room-and-pillar mine, which resembles a checkerboard pattern with large pillars of coal left to support the roof. Typically, after a room-and-pillar mine has advanced to its farthest extent the pillars are then removed using a method called retreat mining – basically, mining backwards. This will not be allowed at the new Westland mine. Wilson Creek believes that even without retreat mining they will be able to recover 65% of the available coal, over 71 million tons. With the current spot price of Northern Appalachian coal at \$78 per ton, the new Westland mine could bring in over \$5 billion in revenues.

It is reasonably certain that Wilson Creek will use the old Westland No. 2 drift entries to reach the coal seam. Pennsylvania’s mining law requires that horizontal mine entries must be at an elevation equal to or greater than the coal seam being mined. At Westland No. 2, the Pittsburgh Seam is 1,010 feet above sea level and dips downward to the north and west on a 2% grade, ending almost 180 feet lower.

The Pittsburgh-Kovalchik project will encompass almost 12,000 acres. Restrictions on mining within 200 feet of Raccoon Creek and the Cherry Valley Reservoir, plus a required 200-foot barrier from adjacent underground mines (Montour No. 1, Morris and Westland No. 1), will take away about 3,000 acres of coal. Still, Wilson Energy believes there will be enough positive cash flow to make the project feasible.

Suffice to say that we Montour Railroad fans are waiting with bated breath for the completion of the new Westland Branch with the hope that we may once again hear the sound of diesel engines pulling coal trains up the grade from Westland to Gilmore Junction.

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