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W.Va. leaders seek coal answers from White House

By Ken Ward Jr.

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- West Virginia political leaders promised Tuesday to speak "with one voice" to clarify the Obama administration's proposals to more strictly regulate mountaintop removal coal mining.

Gov. Joe Manchin, Sen. Jay Rockefeller, and Reps. Nick J. Rahall and Shelley Moore Capito said they would join forces to seek a high-level White House meeting to raise coal industry concerns about tougher permit reviews instituted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"It's about the economy of West Virginia," Manchin said at a news conference after a two-hour, closed-door meeting with industry leaders. "We're just trying to find that balance right now."

Rockefeller said the White House meeting doesn't have to involve President Obama, but must be with someone who can provide "good, hard information" about exactly what new environmental constraints EPA wants to place on mountaintop removal.

Rahall said coal executives at Tuesday's meeting expressed frustration with EPA permit reviews, delays in permit decisions and general confusion about what -- if any -- new standards EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson is imposing on Clean Water Act permits for strip mines.

"We need to know what the rules of the game are," Rahall said. "We need clarity. We need EPA to get its act together."

Capito, the only Republican member of the state's congressional delegation, said the state would be more successful in working with EPA if officials from both parties are involved.

"I think unified voices are always louder and stronger," said Capito, who complained EPA has canceled two private meetings she had scheduled with Jackson to discuss permit review issues.

Representatives of Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., also attended the meeting, but did not speak during the news briefing that followed. Rep. Alan Mollohan, D-W.Va., did not attend, and apparently no one from his staff came in his place.

Manchin called the high-level meeting at the request of Logan County Commissioner Art Kirkendoll, who complained that EPA permit reviews -- including the potential veto of the largest mountaintop removal permit in West Virginia history -- are hurting his county's economy and tax base.

"All we need to do is find out if it's qualifiable," Kirkendoll said. "If it's the right kind of permit, let us go to work."

Top Manchin staffers, county commissioners from various coalfield counties, and several United Mine Workers union representatives joined more than a dozen top coal industry executives for the meeting. The event was moved at the last minute from a public conference room in the Capitol to a private tent structure set up adjacent to the Governor's Mansion for social events. Additional State Police troopers were on hand, but there was no sign of any anti-mountaintop removal protesters.

Paul Vining, president of Patriot Coal Co., said the industry worries that EPA permit reviews and any new standards limiting water quality impacts will have "far-reaching impacts" not just on mountaintop removal, but also on underground mining and coal-waste impoundments.

Vining said large-scale layoffs aren't not imminent, but that industry officials are concerned about long-term matters if they don't find out exactly what EPA's new standards are going to be.

"We're very concerned about our employees in the long term," Vining said. "It may not be next week or next month."

Brett Harvey, president of CONSOL Energy Inc., agreed.

"There has been a change and we would like to know what the rules are," Harvey said.

EPA officials did not immediately provide comment on the meeting.