

FORESTRY: A PRACTICAL LAND USE FOR SURFACE MINING?¹

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Abstract: Fola Coal Company, LLC, is a mountain top, surface coal mine operation in Clay and Nicholas Counties in West Virginia employing over 300 people. Using six spreads of equipment to mine twelve seams, Fola produces about 4.5 million clean tons of low sulfur coal, which is sold on the steam market. Changes in the West Virginia surface mining regulations have made Commercial Forestry one of the post-mining land uses acceptable on mountain top surface mines that seek a variance from returning the land to AOC. The new regulations call for saving the top five feet of material on the surface, including the topsoil and other brown weathered sandstone at the surface, and replacing that material on the reclaimed backfill. Rough grading is also encouraged in the regulations, along with seeding a tree-compatible ground cover that will not present competition to the trees. The reclamation goal of Fola is to implement Commercial Forestry as a PRACTICAL land use for reclaimed areas. Fola has devoted 900 + acres to this land use. Our experience shows that there are several hurdles that must be overcome in order to make Commercial Forestry a viable post-mining land use, and among the most important is changing the perceptions of engineers and state regulatory inspectors that have been accustomed to smooth backfills and lush green grass, both of which are detrimental to tree establishment and growth. The techniques and costs associated with soil and brown sandstone special handling, grading, tree planting, and ground cover establishment will be presented.

Key Words: Forest establishment, forest management, reclamation, topsoil

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