4 Cited After Chaining Selves To WV Agency Door

Tim Huber, AP Business Writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Police arrested four mining protesters who chained themselves to the front door of the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection headquarters Tuesday.

The protest was the latest in a string of actions targeting surface coal mining in Appalachia. Environmental groups want the practice banned, claiming it destroys mountaintops, pollutes water by burying streams and damages the region's cultural heritage, among other things. The coal industry argues that surface mines provide high-paying jobs and cheap electricity.

Earlier actions have targeted coal operations, but organizers want the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Office of Surface Mining, Reclamation and Enforcement to take over regulatory authority from the DEP. They also want DEP Secretary Randy Huffman to resign.

Separate petitions filed by the Sierra Club and other environmental groups are seeking federal takeovers from DEP as well. The groups asked that EPA take over water-quality regulation in June and on Tuesday they asked that OSM take over regulation of a rule requiring buffer zones around streams near surface mines.

"The responsibility at this point has rested with the DEP, who has consistently failed to follow through on their mandate," protest spokesman Charles Suggs said. "This is a slightly different approach than what we've taken to date. I think only the future will tell whether this is changing or adding things."

Huffman was not in the office Tuesday morning and unavailable for comment, DEP spokeswoman Kathy Cosco said. The agency is in an ongoing conversation with federal agencies on surface mining.

Gov. Joe Manchin has no intention of asking Huffman to resign, spokesman Matt Turner said. "Certainly the governor respects their right to protest and I think they were given every opportunity to do that peacefully."

The four protesters were charged with trespassing, obstructing a police officer and disrupting government process after refusing a request by DEP officials to unchain themselves and continue protesting peacefully, said Jay Smithers, director of the West Virginia Division of Protective Services.

They were Michael S. Bowersox, 45, of Idaho; Laura Steepleton, 25, of Florida; Laura Marie Merner, 23, of Texas; and Andrew R. Munn, 23, of Pennsylvania. All were being held on bail.

Another 20 protesters were allowed to stay in the lobby. "It is a public building and

as long as they're not interfering with people having access and not creating any safety issues and concerns, they can remain," Cosco said.

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