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ENVIRONMENTAL EXTREMISTS PUSH FOR FORMAL HEARINGS TO KILL COAL JOBS AND INCREASE UTILITY RATES

Several newspaper stories have been written lately about calls for formal hearings to review rates being charged by many of the utilities that the Public Service Commission regulates, but like so much of what happens in Montgomery, what appears to be occurring actually camouflages dangerous ulterior motives by hidden special interests.

I am referring to environmental extremist groups that have recently stepped up their activities within our state. Their agenda-driven actions threaten to raise the rates you pay for electricity and other utilities, and they harm our ability to remain competitive with other states while creating new jobs and opportunities for our citizens.

For years, environmental extremists have waged a full frontal attack on coal-based energy production, which happens to comprise a large portion of production in Alabama and directly provides more than 5,000 jobs across our state. While their efforts in our state have been rebuffed time and time again, Barack Obama's election and subsequent re-election as president has emboldened them and caused them to redouble their assault.

These environmental groups will use any tool at their disposal, including biased media reports, sleight of hand misdirection and other sideshow issues and antics in order to achieve their goals. Because conservative states like Alabama have proven hostile to the liberal environmentalists' cause, they are now hiding behind a curtain like the Wizard of Oz while personally directing the push for formal PSC hearings to investigate the finances of the state's utilities.

Groups like the Southern Environmental Law Center and the Alabama Environmental Council, who, quite frankly, could not care less about whether the rates you pay are too high, have been driving this effort from its first day.

They hope that once formal hearings, which do not allow for public input, are convened, they can trot out their fancy San Francisco environmental lawyers and junk science hucksters to make what amounts to a legal, judicial case against coal production within our borders.

But if Alabama is to continue its two decades of success in recruiting highly-sought international companies and manufacturing mega-projects to the state, our energy costs must remain affordable and its production must be dependable. Both of those factors depend upon the continuation of coal-based energy production.

When Alabama defeated Louisiana in recruiting a \$5 billion ThyssenKrupps steel manufacturing facility, Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who was in office at the time, credited her state's loss to our ability to meet the plant's massive energy needs more inexpensively than our sister southeastern state. And there's no doubt whatsoever that our comparatively low energy costs have given us an incredible industrial recruitment edge over states throughout the Industrial Northeast and the Rust Belt regions.

Upon my request, Alabama Gas Corporation, Alabama Power Company and Mobile Gas have agreed to keep their rates flat through 2014, but the environmentalists and their liberal friends in the media don't want you to know that. They also don't tell you that the utility bills you pay could soon skyrocket if the environmental extremists have their way.

That is why I was honored when dozens of representatives from Alabama's coal industry appeared at the last PSC meeting to show support for our efforts against the environmental extremists' agenda. Their presence helped demonstrate the fact that the decisions made by the Commission impact the lives, well-being and incomes of thousands of families across Alabama.

During the December PSC meeting, all three members voted unanimously to hold full public proceedings to review utility rates beginning in January. Unlike the formal hearings being demanded by the left, our examination process will allow for vigorous consumer input, full transparency, and complete review, all of which will occur free from the shackles that come with high-paid, out-of-state lawyers and lawsuit-like proceedings.

Doing this will ensure the utility prices you and your family pay continue to be fair and affordable, but it will also cut the environmental extremists off at the knees and take away their bully pulpit against Alabama's coal industry.

Our overall mission at the PSC is to keep utility rates in Alabama affordable and to use the Commission as a job-generating economic development tool.

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