Landowner Odie Brantley

To Lease or Not to Lease?

Odie Brantley, 75, a farmer in the rugged Dolet Hills of DeSoto Parish, has known there was lignite in the hills since he was a child.

He says his father gathered the fuel from natural outcroppings along a small stream near the Brantley farm to fuel a forge in his farm blacksmith shop.

"He carried it home in a sack," says Brantley. "Used his forge to sharpen plows.

"He sharpened lots of things for folks. People all over town then and rocks in the ground -- whooo, Lord -- they grind plows just like a em'ry rock, there."

Brantley said he and other youngsters from the farm settlements surrounding the small stream where the lignite outcroppings are found once dammed up the water to make a swimming hole.

He said the pool was right below a small waterfall where the stream dropped off a thick seam of lignite.

"Water jumpin' right off it -- yeah, we knew it was there," he said.

Brantley said firewood was readily available around his home used lignite for fuel.

"In them days, shocks, we ain't thought we needed no coal!" he said.

He said he never considered lignite anything other than a curiosity that acre for land submitted to strip - mining. Strip - miners there are required to return the disturbed land to the approximate contour existing before mining began and must plant the disturbed soil in a mixture of native grasses and trees.

Failure to meet requirements of the state law can result in forfeiture of the bond.

Louisiana state geologist Leo Hough of Baton Rouge said strip - mining has been so limited in the past that the state has no law regulating it.

"That's up to the man who owns the property," said Hough. "He ought to be able to take care of his own land."

He said the state law regulating strip - mining is a statute prohibiting stream pollution by strip - mining.

Sen. J. Bennett Johnston Jr., a member of the Senate Committee worked on legislation recently approved by the Senate which would set minimum standards for strip - mining in every state.

Johnston said the legislation, still subject to approval of the House, would require submission of plans for strip - mining projects to the secretary of interior for approval.

He said the secretary of interior would be required to approve any strip - miner to post a bond to guarantee reclamation of any land subjected to strip - mining.

Johnston said the federal legislation is aimed primarily at strip - mining operations in mountainous terrains where the cost of reclamation is much higher than in areas like Northwest Louisiana.

"This law would not put too much burden on anybody who would mine in DeSoto Parish," he said. "I'm confident of that.

"At the same time, it would prevent the kind of thing like the gravel pits right outside here, you know," he said.

Johnston said he has noticed several areas of the state where gravel has been strip - mined without concern for reclamation.

"But we need to think of our land in long - range terms, particularly where it can be suited by your own industrial growth and without subjecting the miners to undue expense."

"A Proper Balance"

Johnston said that in working on the strip - mining legislation he tried to strike a proper balance between the environmentalists and the need for energy.

"The energy need is one need we will be concerned with over the next couple of decades," he said.

Johnston maintained that strip-mining is not as serious a threat to the environment in North Louisiana as it is in montainous areas.

"It's quite easy to provide protection in our own area," he said. "For one thing, we don't know of that many resources which we can strip - mine.

"Hopefully this DeSoto Parish operation will be successful. I'm hopeful that they can operate economically," he said.

He said that as passed by the Senate the strip - mining bill would require the replacement and revegetation of disturbed areas in the interior.

The leases provided that in the event of harassment it would be required to return the disturbed land to its original contour or elevation.

The leases make no provision for reclaiming land affected by strip - mining.

In all of the leases made public, landowners are paid $10 per acre for the mining rights on their property.

The leases provided that the company "shall fully comply with all applicable laws, rules and regulations of any state or local governmental jurisdiction with reference to the protection of the environment and reclamation of land."

The leases make no provision for reclaiming land affected by strip - mining.

He said he is in no hurry to lease his land.

"Like a feller has a horse and the first thing he's got to catch 'er, he talk real sweet and nice to 'er and reach out to pat 'er, but when he get the bridle on 'er... "If things don't be suited by your own mind, don't do it!"