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Public Statement by Representative Burdick Regarding Indian Coal, February 8, 1951

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FREEZING INDIANS SHOULD GET GARRISON COAL

Washington, D. C.--A short time ago it was brought to my attention that little is being done, or apparently planned to be done with any of the huge mountains of lignite coal being excavated from the Garrison Dam area in North Dakota. I wrote John B. Hart, executive director of the North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission, suggesting that the coal would be very useful in hundreds of Indian homes, on reservations in my state, where, during past severe winters Indians in some instances have been forced to burn even their furniture to keep warm. With all the coal at the Garrison Dam, it seems criminal to me that such a situation should exist.

Mr. Hart was at once enthusiastic and has cooperated with me to the fullest extent in trying to obtain a release on this coal. The Indian Bureau at first protested that the coal stockpiled near the damsite is of very poor quality, unsuitable for burning in cook-stoves or heating stoves in its native condition. I now hold a letter, however, signed by Colonel F. M. Albrecht, chief engineer of the Garrison District in which he states that the coal is being used regularly, in considerable quantities at the central heating and power plant at Riverdale. Colonel Albrecht states that he would need specific authority to transfer some of the coal stockpile to the Indian service, but that he believes "such authority would be readily forthcoming upon request." Basis for transfer, says Albrecht, is reimbursement of the actual cost to his office of the materials as they are salvaged and stored in stockpiles, plus the cost of any handling, processing and transportation performed by the Army Engineers for the agency obtaining the coal.

According to the Army Engineer's own figures, the cost of the lignite as it stands in the stockpiles is 32 cents per ton. Loaded on rail cars or trucks, without processing, the cost is 54 cents per ton. The Army Engineers offer to run the unprocessed coal through what is called a primary crusher, reducing the maximum size of the lumps to about five inches, for only 44 cents more, or a total of 98 cents per ton.

I believe this coal question is going to be worked out, and I'm going to keep after everybody concerned until something definite is worked out. The coal might have some objectionable odor, the engineers warn. I hardly think a family of warm and comfortable Indians will make much of an objection to a small odor from the coal, while a North Dakota blizzard rages outside. When I first brought up the subject of utilizing this coal, the Indian Bureau people said, "Oh, those terrible lignite fumes will asphyxiate someone." Well, any kind of heating is bad if you don't allow a means of ventilation. Any kind of fuel-burning stove will burn up oxygen and our Indian populations knows that just as certainly as do the rest of us.

The coal can be obtained at a very reasonable cost. It can be stockpiled on our various reservations at a central point where the Indians could obtain and transport it with their own means. Or, it could be distributed to our indigent Indians upon application to their reservation superintendent.

G. Warren Spaulding, area director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, advises me that he has dispatched a man to inspect the coal and "determine its usability in present Indian Service Equipment within an economical distribution area." I will be interested to know what he finds out, and also what he considers "Indian Service Equipment" and an "economical distribution area."

Spaulding's inspector, I hope, will furnish the Army Engineers with an estimated quantity of the coal needed. The Army Engineers say they will not be able to request higher authority to transfer the coal until such an estimate is made.

I see this as a splendid opportunity for the Indian Bureau to use a little foresight--for once!

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