

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **The United States Department of Justice Releases Draft Environmental Impact Statement For the Proposed Federal Prison in Letcher County**

**(LETCHER COUNTY, KENTUCKY)**— On Friday, March 1st, amidst increasing public opposition across the nation, the Federal Bureau of Prisons published a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) concerning the proposed construction of Federal Correctional Institute Letcher (FCI Letcher), a 1,408-bed federal prison to be built on a former mountaintop removal coal mine site in Roxana, KY. The release of the EIS initiates a 45-day public comment period in which citizens can voice their opinions on the purported benefits and adverse impacts of the prison, which will cost taxpayers more than half a billion dollars. In addition to the 45-day public comment period, citizens will have an in-person opportunity to speak on the issue at Letcher County Central High School on March 28, 2024 at 12:45 pm.

Building Community Not Prisons (BCNP), a coalition of local, state, and national stakeholders, opposes the construction of FCI Letcher on numerous grounds, including the significant strain it would impose on the individuals incarcerated within its walls and their families as well as the potential harm to local ecology and economy it would cause. One of BCNP's organizational members is Concerned Letcher Countians (CLC), a volunteer group dedicated to the county and its future that opposes FCI Letcher. CLC's principled and informed opposition stands in stark contrast to the BOP's claims of universal local support for the prison. As Letcher County resident and CLC member Artie Ann Bates noted, "it would be difficult for the Bureau of Prisons to claim unwavering support in Letcher County, unless they have done an actual survey of a representative sample of the population. Further, since the agency had two secret meetings with the Letcher Planning Commission, and refused to do the same with Concerned Letcher Countians, it would appear that they have a skewed view of the actual support for this project locally."

As a federal prison, FCI Letcher would incarcerate people from the Mid-Atlantic region of the Bureau of Prisons. That means anyone within a 500-mile radius of the proposed Letcher County site can be sent there. Prisons in rural Appalachia isolate the incarcerated from their communities and loved ones, straining familial bonds, which are vital for successfully reintegrating into society at the conclusion of a sentence. Anthony "Pete" Petty knows intimately how this process plays out. Petty is from Washington D.C. and has spent time incarcerated at four different prisons in Central Appalachia, including federal facilities USP Big Sandy, USP McCreary, USP Lee, and Red Onion State Prison in Wise County, Virginia. Petty notes that, "It's a long way from home - putting families through hardships to see their loved one- it's expensive.

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it's a long ride, people have to take off work, get a hotel, and face possible discriminatory and racist treatment.”

The prison’s harms will be felt locally as well. In contrast to the unsubstantiated claims from the BOP of purported economic benefits, numerous studies from social scientists have reached far different conclusions. One such study, authored by the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy, concluded that Eastern Kentucky counties Clay, Martin, and McCreary “remain among the poorest in the state, and within one of the poorest congressional districts in the nation, despite federal prisons operating in these counties for two to three decades.” With a price tag of over \$500 million taxpayer dollars, FCI Letcher stands on the same false promises of prison-based economic development.

An earlier attempt to build a prison in Letcher County was defeated in 2019, and both the [Trump](#) and [Biden](#) Administrations have requested that the original funding for the prison be rescinded. Even [top officials](#) at the Department of Justice have publicly stated this new construction is unnecessary due to a declining federal prison population. Moreover, since this initial defeat, Letcher County suffered devastating floods during the summer of 2022. Housing needs in the region remain unmet, and flood risks remain significant, with one [study](#) noting that Letcher County has the country’s highest risk of inland flooding, posing a continuing risk to health and safety. In the 2022 flood, water inundated all roads and bridges to the proposed prison site, making it completely inaccessible by land. Petty continued, “They know this site is going to be toxic and cause long-term health issues. At USP Big Sandy we had to get the water from another county. The CO’s (correctional officers) brought their own gallons of water in. I saw my friends get sick over that bad water. I saw them suffer bad health. It made me scared, sad, and angry and now it might happen again?”

The construction of FCI Letcher would pose urgent risks for local residents and ecosystems and for people subjected to criminalization and incarceration in the federal prisons system. “It is time to transition away from systems of mass incarceration and mega-infrastructure projects. Together, they increase our vulnerability to the social and ecological harms of climate instability, over-imprisonment, and environmental destruction,” says Emily Posner, General Counsel at Voice of the Experienced.