

Trump's War for Coal Raises Risks

Exclusive: President Trump's war for coal is threatening progress on alternative energy while creating hazards both in the weather effects from global warming and in health risks from breathing dirty air, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

When Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt proudly declared "The war against coal is over," as part of his Oct. 9 announcement of plans to repeal the Obama-era Clean Power Plan, he neglected to mention the thousands of Americans whose lives will be sacrificed so coal producers and utilities can declare victory in the nation's environmental wars.

As Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune said in a statement, "Donald Trump and Scott Pruitt will go down in infamy for launching one of the most egregious attacks ever on public health, our climate, and the safety of every community in the United States. He's proposing to throw out a plan that would prevent thousands of premature deaths and tens of thousands of childhood asthma attacks every year."

Coal burning produces deadly particulates, toxic metals, and other pollutants that have a ruinous effect on public health, even with current controls on smokestack emissions. A 2015 analysis by the EPA of the Clean Power Plan, which proposed flexible measures to curb carbon pollution from power plants across the country, noted that associated cuts to smog and soot would "bring major health benefits for American families."

By 2030, when its provisions fully kicked in, the plan would result in "up to 3,600 fewer premature deaths; 90,000 fewer asthma attacks in children; 1,700 fewer hospital admissions; and avoiding 300,000 missed days of school and work."

Those numbers reflected only the projected impact of the Clean Power Plan, not the total impact of coal burning. Carnegie Mellon professor Jay Apt recently cited a vast scientific literature that supports estimates of premature deaths from U.S. power plant emissions at between 7,500 and 52,000 annually – roughly comparable to total fatalities from car crashes.

Switching electric utilities completely from coal to natural gas would slash those emissions and lower human health costs by upward of \$50 billion a year, Apt and a team of fellow scientists calculated in a 2016 paper.

That process is already underway for economic reasons. Thanks to cheap natural gas prices, nearly half of U.S. coal-fired power plants have shut down or

announced plans to retire in recent years—including nearly a dozen since Trump took office.

A recent study issued by the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University noted, “A surge in US natural gas production due to the shale revolution has driven down prices and made coal increasingly uncompetitive in US electricity markets. Coal has also faced growing competition from renewable energy, with solar costs falling 85 percent between 2008 and 2016 and wind costs falling 36 percent.”

Unless those basic economic facts change, it declared, “US coal consumption will continue its decline despite Trump’s aggressive rollback of Obama-era regulations.”

War on Renewable Energy

This March, for the first time ever, wind and solar produced 10 percent of all electricity in the United States, reflecting their growing challenge to coal and their rapidly declining cost. The Trump administration is looking for ways to reverse that trend, even if that means ending the tremendous job boom in alternative energy industries.

At EPA, besides attempting to kill the Clean Power Plan, Trump apparently hopes to roll back costly regulations of mercury emissions and coal ash from power plants by appointing former coal company lobbyist Andrew Wheeler to serve as deputy administrator of the agency.

EPA’s Pruitt has also publicly urged repeal of federal tax credits for wind and solar power – without noting that they are scheduled to disappear by 2020 and 2022, respectively, and without acknowledging that extensive federal subsidies for coal for years tilted the playing field in favor of fossil fuels. (President Trump is said by West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice to be “really interested” in providing a lavish new federal subsidy for Appalachian coal.)

Meanwhile, over at the Department of Energy, the White House has asked for cuts of nearly 70 percent in the department’s programs for renewable energy and energy efficiency, including its much-acclaimed advanced research program.

Energy Secretary Rick Perry last month asked the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to ram through new economic regulations favoring ailing coal and nuclear plants. His transparent attempt to interfere with energy markets ran into determined opposition not only from wind and solar representatives, but members of the gas industry. One of Trump’s own appointees to FERC objected, saying “I did not sign up to go blow up the markets.”

The Interior Department has weighed in, too, with Secretary Ryan Zinke declaring during National Clean Energy Week that solar companies should stop looking for sites to produce energy on federal lands. To date, his department has approved only one solar project, compared to the 60 approved by the Obama administration over eight years.

Zinke's anti-solar stance conflicts with the opinion of two-thirds of adult Americans, who believe the United States should give priority to renewable energy over fossil fuels.

Perhaps the Trump administration's biggest threat to renewable energy is its potential support for a new ruling by the U.S. International Trade Commission, which found that cheap Chinese solar panels have hurt U.S.-based manufacturers. The Solar Energy Industry Association, the main industry lobby, has decried the ruling and warned that punitive tariffs would raise panel prices, slam the breaks on solar adoption, and cost nearly 90,000 U.S. jobs.

The ruling was also opposed by the conservative Heritage Foundation, at least two Republican governors, and a group of retired military energy experts.

"But for Trump," observed the *Washington Post's* Dino Grandoni, "the commission's decision presents a rare opportunity for him to penalize two of his favorite punching bags – China and Mexico, which was also named in the ITC ruling . . . – without Congress getting in the way." Just as important, it would allow Trump to land another blow for the coal industry.

By waging war against renewable energy industry, the Trump administration isn't just putting hundreds of thousands of good jobs at risk. In the long run, it is jeopardizing efforts to slow the pace of global warming, which has contributed to the vast scale and devastation of recent natural disasters ranging from hurricanes to fires.

Just as significant, the administration threatens to condemn to misery or death thousands of Americans who will be forced to breathe dirtier air in order to line the pockets of Trump's coal-industry supporters. By fighting for coal, Trump is waging war on our very lives.

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