



W.Va. Experts Say Climate Change Debate Is Over

Experts: W.Va. energy industry must recognize legal, political reality of climate change

By TOM BREEN

The Associated Press

SOUTH CHARLESTON, W.Va.

There's no point in debating the science of climate change, because it's already a political and legal reality, energy industry experts said Friday.

Representatives from the United Mine Workers of America and American Electric Power, the nation's largest single buyer of coal, told The Associated Press' annual Legislative Lookahead forum that West Virginia policymakers need to recognize that new reality.

Requirements ordering companies to reduce their carbon emissions are on their way, said Tim Mallen, an environmental manager for AEP. "Whether it comes this year or next year is not really that big a deal. It's coming."

Last year, the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation setting requirements for the reduction of carbon emissions and establishing incentives to meet those goals.

The bill, often referred to as "cap and trade" legislation, has been sharply criticized in West Virginia by coal producers and their allies, who say the bill amounts to a job killer for West Virginia's most iconic industry.

The measure is currently parked in the U.S. Senate, which has its own climate change bill. But both Mallen and Eugene Trisko, a lawyer for the UMWA, say regulation is coming regardless of what happens to either bill.

A 2007 U.S. Supreme Court decision charged the federal Environmental Protection Agency with regulating carbon emissions, and Trisko said regulation from that agency could produce "far more deleterious impacts on miners, mining communities and the state of West Virginia than would properly balanced national legislation."

Without discussing climate change itself, Gov. Joe Manchin said later in the forum that the EPA and the Obama administration are pursuing a misguided policy. He slammed the cap and trade legislation in Congress.

"Cap and trade will destroy the might of this nation," he said.

Manchin said coal as a resource is "in transition," but it can be made more environmentally friendly, with federal help rather than federal antagonism.

"They've got to be committed to fixing the problem," he said. "They can't just be committed to vilifying the things they don't like."

Both Trisko and Mallen said the House bill is flawed, but contains helpful provisions. In particular, they want to see increased federal investment in carbon capture and sequestration technologies designed to reduce power plant emissions, like the project AEP launched at its Mountaineer plant in Mason County.

But the union and AEP think the benchmarks for carbon emission reductions being discussed in Congress are unrealistic. The House bill, for instance, calls for a 20 percent reduction in emissions by 2020, the equivalent of roughly a billion tons.

"It is equivalent to removing every car, pickup truck and SUV from the road," Trisko said, calling that "too much too soon."

Development of other energy sources is also essential for West Virginia, which relies heavily on coal as an energy source and a keystone of economic life, said Evan Hansen of Downstream Strategies, an environmental consulting firm in Morgantown.

Hansen said West Virginia needs to expand its development of other energy sources, including wind power, ahead not only of federal regulation but an anticipated drop in Central Appalachian coal production over the next two decades.

The development of "decentralized wind power" — basically, personal turbines running at homes and other locations — is one example, Hansen said. He also argued that thousands of jobs can be created by remediating environmental problems on abandoned mine sites, estimating that up to 4,000 jobs could be created by focusing on water pollution on old mine lands alone.

"There are a lot of opportunities out there to help diversify the local economy as coal production slows down," Hansen said.

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