

Top 5 Myths About Coal

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The facts are pretty simple, the U.S. Department of Energy said: "Burning coal is the dirtiest way we produce electricity." And yet oddly the Obama administration, which has embraced climate legislation and green jobs, is a supporter of the oxymoronic "clean coal." The White House Web site proclaims that one of Obama's priorities is to, "develop and deploy clean coal technology."

And Obama isn't the only who is helping to spread the "clean coal" myth. The new stimulus bill, which just passed Congress, calls for \$3.4 billion for "fossil energy research," which refers to carbon dioxide sequestration projects (more on the problems with that below) -- the key component in the "clean coal" fantasy. It's time to put an end to that by debunking some of the top myths they use to keep Americans in the dark about their energy.

1. It's Clean

The coal industry has paid a lot of money to convince people that our dirtiest source of energy can actually be clean. The Center for American Progress reported that a coalition of 48 coal and utility companies, which form the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity, shelled out \$45 million on advertising last year. And its money paid off.

The PR firm they hired, the Hawthorne Group, boasted in December, "President-elect Obama and Sen. McCain, their running mates and their surrogates adopted our language and included it as part of their stump speeches. ... We nearly turned candidate events into clean coal rallies."

The backbone of the "clean coal" rhetoric is based on several layers of lies and misinformation. The first is the idea that there is a technology that we have now to make coal clean. The truth is that researchers have been trying to develop a way to burn coal with less-devastating contributions to global warming pollution, which involves capturing the CO₂ emissions and storing them somehow, probably underground.

This is often referred to as carbon capture and sequestration (CCS), which moves carbon emissions from one waste stream to another somewhere else and does nothing to prevent the release of highly toxic mercury and other chemicals released when coal is burned.

"Currently there's no economical way to capture and sequester carbon emissions from coal, and many experts doubt there ever will be," Bryan Walsh wrote in *Time* magazine.

Proponents of CCS are missing a key part of the puzzle. The technology only addresses how coal is burned. There is not now, nor will there ever be, a clean way to get coal out of the ground, clean it, dispose of the waste and ship it to a plant -- especially when mountaintop removal mining is used.

2. It's Safe

If you live near a coal-burning power plant or an extraction area, then you already know it's a myth that coal is safe. However, the rest of the country got a glimpse at the potential hazards just before Christmas when more than 1 billion gallons of contaminated coal-waste sludge spilled from a holding pond at the Tennessee Valley Authority coal plant in Harriman, Tenn., on Dec. 22.

The chemical-laced flood wiped out neighborhoods, covering cars and knocking homes off their foundations, while spilling into a tributary of the Clinch River -- a major source of drinking water.

In all, over 400 acres were covered with the toxic coal-ash mess, leaving enormous questions about the risk to human and environmental health.

As the horror of this spill was just setting in, TVA experienced another, smaller, though also toxic, spill at one of their plants in Alabama, causing a scurry of action across the country examining the realities of our coal use. It turns out that the coal ash from the Tennessee spill is a very common contaminant from coal burning. A report from *Earth Justice* found:

The waste's toxic contaminants, including arsenic, cadmium, chromium, lead, selenium and thallium, can readily pollute streams and drinking water. These chemicals can result in a number of health effects in humans, including neurological damage, cancer and reproductive failure, as well as widespread ecosystem damage.

The health threats of coal are numerous and aren't simply related to spills and other accidents. The National Resources Defense Council reports that, "Power plant pollution is responsible for 38,200 nonfatal heart attacks and 554,000 asthma attacks each year." People who live near coal production areas have a 70 percent increased risk for developing kidney disease and a 64 percent increased risk for developing chronic lung diseases such as emphysema.

There is also a risk to those who live near where coal is burned. Fine-particulate matter pollution from U.S. power plants leads to more than 24,000 deaths each year.

3. It's Cheap

In the last century, we seem to have goofed on our math by forgetting to add in some important externalities when it comes to the environment and energy. So anyone who says that coal is cheap, has obviously failed to include its impact on communities and ecosystems.

The only way cheap is associated with coal is when it comes to property values. In Appalachia, where MTR mining uses 3 million pounds of explosives a day to blow the tops off peaks, it has made nearby people's homes and land worth next to nothing.

Constant dynamite blasting has cracked foundations and shaken people's nerves. And after the blasting, the rock is dumped into valleys, creating "fills" and burying streams. Heavy rains have caused these fills to collapse, making people who live downhill fearful of massive floods. And it makes the resale of their homes virtually impossible.

There are also slurry impoundments, or massive dams that are created to hold the toxic waste after coal is cleaned, which leak into groundwater and pose enormous hazards when they fail. Right now, one West Virginia community is pleading for the removal of a sludge dam that sits just hundreds of yards from an elementary school.

There's no way to figure out the untold billions of dollars worth of damage that burning coal has caused to our air and water.

A report by Greenpeace and the Dutch institute CE Delft found that when it comes to coal:

The true costs that have been left out of the cheap prices. It estimates -- conservatively -- that the damage caused by coal's mining accidents, its global carbon dioxide emissions, and the illnesses it causes adds \$451 billion in annual costs to the simple buying price.

That's not all. Not included in that dollar amount are damage estimates for acid mine drainage, mercury pollution or ground water contamination, because reliable global estimates for the cost of these occurrences do not currently exist.

Clearly it's time we began switching to clean energy or foot the bill for the true cost of dirty power.

4. It's Good for the Economy

It used to be that industry could win big by using the "jobs" card, and it could pit environmentalists and human health advocates against rural workers and unions. But those days seem to have passed, especially when it comes to the coal industry, where jobs in the sector are dwindling, thanks to the industry itself.

Appalachian Voices reports:

Mountaintop removal is a mining technique designed, from the very start, to take the labor force out of the mining operation. What used to take hundreds of miners employed for decades, now takes a half-dozen heavy-equipment operators and blasting technicians a couple of years. According to the bureau of labor statistics, in the early 1950s there were between 125,000 and 145,000 miners employed in West Virginia; in 2004 there were just over 16,000. During that time, coal production has increased. These days, it seems better for communities to go with renewables. The U.S. just became the world's leading producer of wind energy and may be a leader in solar soon. The Earth Policy Institute found that, "An investment in wind power produces almost three times as many jobs as the same investment in coal power. And an investment in solar power produces almost four times as many jobs and energy efficiency, almost 30 times as many jobs as coal power."

Activists in the Coal River area of West Virginia have taken those numbers to heart and found that wind is a better investment than coal, even in their necks of the woods where they are trying to persuade Massey Energy to forgo a MTR site for wind. Their research has shown that, "The wind farm would provide over a million dollars more in tax revenue per year than the mountaintop removal site, and would provide jobs and clean energy forever."

Of course jobs in the region don't just have to come from energy. *Appalachian Voice* reports:

The biggest coal-producing state in Appalachia, West Virginia, tourism already contributes more to the economy, and creates far more jobs than the coal industry and has for more than a decade. It doesn't take an economist to tell you that mountaintop removal is permanently destroying the best economic assets that mountain counties have: the beautiful and ancient Appalachian Mountains themselves. When you consider the huge toll that coal has on human health and the environment (see points 1, 2, and 3), it's a no-brainer. Coal has proved for over a hundred years, that it may make corporations rich, but it makes communities poor.

5. It Can Help Stop Global Warming

Currently, 30 percent of U.S. carbon emissions comes from burning coal, and it is the leading source of global warming pollution. The world's leading scientists have formed a consensus that we need immediate action to address global warming.

The *This Is Reality Campaign* writes, "The chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Rajendra Pachauri, in 2007, said, 'If there's no action before 2012, that's too late. What we do in the next two to three years will determine our future. This is the defining moment.' For coal to maintain a role in America's energy mix, the industry must act quickly to stop emitting CO₂."

So, we need to act quickly, which should translate into no new coal-burning power plants. But instead, unbelievably, the coal industry is hoping to convince people that they won't have to change their way of life at all and that burning coal can somehow be "green".

The Hawthorne group wrote of the success of their "clean coal" campaign: "We did this by sending 'clean coal' branded teams to hundreds of presidential candidate events, carrying a positive message (we can be part of the solution to climate change), which was reinforced by giving away free T-shirts and hats emblazoned with our branding: Clean Coal."

But all the free hats in the world can't make up for the fact that the technology they are counting on isn't a reality. A report from the Union of Concerned Scientists said, "Although carbon sequestration has been the subject of considerable research and analysis, it has yet to be demonstrated in the form of commercial-scale, fully integrated projects at coal-fired power plants."

So, right now according to the Department of Energy, "there are roughly 600 coal plants producing electricity in the U.S. Not one of them captures and stores its global warming pollution" and there is also not one demonstration plant in the U.S. either.

If we need immediate action on climate change, clearly CCS is not going to be part of that mix. And frankly, despite its rhetoric that "we can be part of the solution," the coal industry is doing everything it can to be part of the problem.

The Center for American Progress reported, "The coal mining and electric utility industries spent over \$125 million combined in the first nine months of 2008 to lobby Congress to delay global-warming-pollution reductions until clean coal technology is ready."

And it looks like that technology won't be ready anytime soon:

If only coal companies hadn't blown millions on free hats and T-shirts! Let's hope Congress and the White House come to their senses and decide to direct money to truly clean sources of energy instead of propping up our biggest polluters and trying to pass them off as green.