

Did environmental rules kill mining? For coal country, that's yesterday's debate

By **Paul Wesslund** - November 13, 2017



People in coal country aren't waiting around for their mining jobs to return, says a group of researchers who just published a report on focus groups held in Appalachian coal communities.

Sanya Carley, an associate professor at Indiana University's School of Public and Environmental Affairs in Bloomington, is one of three authors of a report on focus groups in West Virginia and Kentucky coal communities that expressed optimism and excitement about diversifying the region's economy.

"Concepts like the war on coal came up," Indiana University Associate Professor Sanya Carley told Forward Kentucky. "But what we heard was less of a blaming of the government or the country for putting them in the predicament that they're in, and more of an acceptance that the country had moved on from coal."

Instead, Carley said, focus group members seemed excited about reinventing the region's economy, with "the repeated theme of rejuvenation, recreating a self-identity for the community, and looking for new economic opportunities."

The Report

The report on the focus groups was published in the ***Energy Research & Social Science*** journal under the headline, "Adaptation, culture, and the energy transition in American coal country." Twenty-five people took part in two discussions: one in Ghent, located in central West Virginia, and the other on the Kentucky border in Williamson, West Virginia.

The report argues that political rhetoric promising to revive the coal industry could actually *hurt* efforts to diversify the mining-based economy of the region.

“Efforts to remove environmental regulations... will not change the near- or long-term economic trajectories for coal communities,” says the report, noting that coal mining jobs have decreased 71 percent since 1985. “Promising coal communities a return of their jobs has the potential to fill them with false hope, which can threaten the very progress that has been made to date as individuals and communities work to redefine their collective identity and create new, dynamic, and promising opportunities.”

The Focus Groups

An Indiana University report on a pair of focus groups in West Virginia and Kentucky coal country, found that when people in the groups talked about the region’s prospects for the future, they used words like “community” (386 times), “jobs” (270 times), “youth” (81 times), and “opportunity” (80 times.)

The Appalachian focus groups are part of a larger project on the energy transition in the United States, conducted by Indiana University’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs. The research team combines Carley’s energy policy specialty with Indiana University Associate Professor David Konisky’s political science background, and the earth sciences expertise of Tom Evans, a professor in the IU Geography Department.

In addition to studying how the changing energy picture affects coal communities, the researchers are also talking to people in St. Louis and Detroit about the effects of energy prices and who has access to new technology—for example, are electric cars and energy efficiency improvements equally available to all income levels?

The Ghent focus group was made up of 16 laid-off coal industry workers taking a job skills and retraining class from the local New River Community and Technical College. The other group was a more random sampling of the community of Williamson, West Virginia, and nearby Kentucky.

The report says those communities have suffered under a coal industry that is declining for several reasons: rising prices for coal, mechanization of coal mining work, lower demand for electricity, and falling prices for coal substitutes like natural gas and renewable energy. Environmental regulations are among the least-significant causes of the loss of mining jobs.

“These trends suggest a bleak long-term forecast for coal as a market commodity, regardless of retrenchment of relevant U.S. environmental regulations,” says the paper. And people in the focus groups tended to agree. One of them said, “I can tell you what my grand-daddy always said, no matter how many times you beat and kick that dead horse, it’s not getting up to plow again.”

The paper reports that when the groups talked about the future, they used words like community, jobs, opportunity, and youth.

“When the transition began, it was marked by much anger and resentment,” says the paper. But for many in the focus groups, “that anger has been replaced by excitement about new opportunities.”

New career possibilities mentioned by focus group members included electric line worker, solar and wind energy installer, truck driver, or tourism or construction.

The Barriers

But those jobs don’t pay as much as a lot of coal industry jobs, they might not be nearby, and there’s the problem of supporting a family while taking classes to train for a new career.

Those hurdles raised another reaction from the focus groups. Associate professor Carley paraphrases that attitude as, “Now after we’ve provided the primary resource to the country for decades, it’s the responsibility of both the government and the rest of the country to help us out.”

Tweaking unemployment benefits could be a way to help, says Carley, noting that while the retraining program at the local community college runs 32 weeks, unemployment payments end after 26 weeks.

“Providing an extension of unemployment benefits through the full training period would be something that the government could do,” says Carley. She said focus group members felt they could be helped with “health resources, economic development resources, education for our children that the rest of the country could provide for us without just

making us feel like they've walked all over us, they've taken what they needed then they walked away."

Those effects from changing energy trends has been a focus of David Konisky, one of the three authors of the paper. Konisky has written about environmental and energy justice, which he defines as looking at how different groups of people get affected disproportionately by energy changes.

"I did a book which asked the question of whether or not the federal government's approach to environmental justice has been effective and the answer was clearly not," Konisky said in an interview. "The title of the book is *Failed Promises*, which gives away the punchline. The federal government has really struggled, particularly the (Environmental Protection Agency) over many different presidential administrations addressing the environmental justice issue."

In Appalachia, environmental justice asks about the quality of life for people who live there as coal's role changes.

"They want their communities to be embraced by policymakers ... to make sure the future for them is bright and that they're not completely abandoned by the combination of market forces and government policies," says Konisky. "People are willing to embrace the change but they also realize they may need a helping hand to come through the change in a positive way."

Or maybe they're not so willing to embrace change.

The Trump Effect

The thing about the focus groups is that they were held a year ago. Then Donald Trump got elected president, promising to put coal miners back to work by rolling back environmental rules. The Indiana University researchers canceled a third focus group that had been scheduled for after the election in a coal area of southern Indiana. "We thought the data wouldn't be comparable," says Konisky.

Instead, the researchers are in the middle of a follow-up project. They're surveying the

community leaders who helped them set up the focus groups, asking those leaders about post-election attitudes in the study areas of St. Louis, Detroit, and Kentucky and West Virginia.

Are coal communities still focused on moving away from coal and excited about diversifying the region's economy? Or has the new governance in Washington, D.C., persuaded them that their mining jobs can return? The researchers expect to publish the results of the post-election follow-up research early next year.

Stay tuned.

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Thoughts? Comments? Add yours in the comment section at the bottom of the page.



Paul Wesslund

Paul Wesslund retired in 2015 after 20 years as editor of *Kentucky Living* magazine, and is now a freelance writer focusing on energy issues, doing business as Highway 61 Communications, LLC.

