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November 6, 2012

Coal reality: Time to face facts

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Two West Virginia politicians -- Sen. Jay Rockefeller and the late Sen. Robert C. Byrd -- bluntly warned that Appalachia's coal industry is heading for decline. They urged intelligent long-range planning to cope with what seems to be an inevitable economic transition.

"Face reality," Rockefeller declared in a West Virginia Day speech. Three years earlier, the aging Byrd said it's time to "speak the truth" and "have an open and honest dialogue about coal's future in West Virginia."

However, other state leaders are like ostriches with heads in the sand, refusing to see changes that are eroding King Coal. They loudly blame federal pollution controls for the industry's problems. But pollution plays only a minor part.

As reporter Ken Ward Jr. outlined, ruthless laws of economics are undermining Central Appalachia -- Southern West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky. Thick, easy-to-reach seams are mostly depleted, leaving only expensive coal. Western coal is dramatically cheaper. So is Marcellus Shale gas, which burns cleaner. Power utilities and other customers are dropping Appalachian contracts. Out-of-state coal corporations are closing West Virginia mines and laying off miners. The firms' stock prices have slumped.

Federal researchers estimate that Central Appalachian tonnage will fall more than half in the coming decade.

Sean O'Leary, of the West Virginia Center for Budget and Policy, told Ward:

"The reality is that even without greenhouse gas or mercury regulations, coal production in Central Appalachia is going to dramatically decline. Repealing environmental regulations won't make the remaining coal seams in West Virginia any thicker or easier to mine, and it won't stop power plants from converting to natural gas."

The center's director, Ted Boettner, added: "Most alarming is that the governor and many legislators are not putting the issue of coal decline and transition at the top of their legislative agenda."

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A couple of years ago, a landmark report by Downstream Strategies of Morgantown warned that Central Appalachian coal "production is projected to decline significantly in the coming decade." Analyst Evan Hansen told Ward that most West Virginia leaders are shutting their eyes to the ominous change.

This topic is profoundly important to West Virginia. Hardship already is striking some coal communities. The

governor and Legislature should quit ignoring the economic shift and begin major planning for what lies ahead.

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