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Report details path to clean energy for WV

by Ken Ward Jr., Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — West Virginia could improve energy efficiency, expand renewable generation of electricity and increase its reliance on natural gas as part of an “all-of-the-above” plan to meet the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s proposal to curb greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change, according to a new analysis released on Monday.

The use of coal would decline under such a plan, but coal would still account for three-quarters of the state’s generation load, according to the analysis, prepared by the West Virginia University College of Law’s Center for Energy and Sustainable Development and the environmental consulting firm Downstream Strategies.

Lawmakers could help the state find a reasonable path toward meeting the EPA proposal by removing [restrictions on how the state Department of Environmental Protection seeks to comply](#), creating state standards mandating that power companies consider alternative energy and include renewables in their generation portfolios, and looking for ways that existing coal-fired power plants can repower or cofire with natural gas, the report said.

West Virginia leaders could also revisit the effort by Senate Minority Leader Jeff Kessler, D-Marshall, to look for ways to diversify the economy in communities that are being hard hit by the ongoing decline of the state’s coal industry, the report concluded.

“The challenges for West Virginia under the Clean Power Plan are significant, but they are not insurmountable,” the report said.

The new report provides a more detailed analysis, following up on an earlier effort released last October which [outlined broad options for how policymakers could push West Virginia to reduce its carbon dioxide emissions](#) toward eventually complying with the Obama administration’s effort to lead the world in trying to avoid the more devastating impacts of climate change.

Among other things, the report that explains there is little that the DEP can really do to protect the coal industry when it eventually writes a plan for complying with the carbon dioxide rules that the EPA is expected to finalize in August.

West Virginia power plants burned a bit more than 29 million tons of coal in 2013. While 17 million tons of that coal was mined in West Virginia, 40 percent was imported from other states.

“Of the 112.8 million tons of coal that was mined in West Virginia, only 15 percent was burned at West Virginia power plants,” the report notes. “West Virginia’s Clean Power Plan pathway, therefore, will have a small effect on the amount of coal mined in West Virginia. Other states’ Clean Power Plan pathways will have a greater effect on West Virginia coal production as exports to those states for electricity generation decline.”

Among the possibilities discussed in the new report:

- Wind generation in the state could increase from the current 580 megawatts to as much as 2,100 megawatts by 2030.
- Solar capacity could increase from less than 2 megawatts to 410 megawatts over that same time period. The National Renewable Energy Laboratory has said that West Virginia has “enormous potential for solar development.”
- Better end-use efficiency could reduce West Virginia’s electricity demand by nearly 11 percent by 2030. Utilities serving West Virginia have far more ambitious efficiency programs for their customers in surrounding states.
- Continued growth in the state’s natural-gas sector holds “significant promise,” but policymakers are also “rightly cautious about changes that simply transition from over-reliance on one resource (i.e., coal) to over-reliance on another resources (i.e., natural gas) over the long term.

“While these challenges appear stark in the face of carbon pollution mandates, the long-term loss of coal jobs in West Virginia has persisted for decades, and in recent years declines in coal jobs and coal severance tax revenues have grown increasingly more pressing as market forces converge with increasingly stringent environmental regulations,” the report said. “West Virginia has the resources to meet these challenges, however, and can usher in new economic opportunities throughout the Mountain State.”

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