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Is Coal on the Sidelines in Climate Change Debate?

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Rockefeller, Rahall seek protections for state industry.

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This is the first week of a three-week series examining how the global warming debate might impact West Virginia.

One of the biggest energy issues facing West Virginia may rest with people who know very little about where the nation's energy actually comes from.

A recent flurry of discussion and debate over the issue of greenhouse gas emissions and global warming may result in regulations that curb how much carbon is released into the atmosphere.

But as federal lawmakers discuss how to control greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide, one thing becomes apparent -- most don't really understand the role coal plays in providing the energy they depend on to run their computers, light their offices and heat their homes.

"I think the image around the country of coal is one of amazing ignorance," said Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va. "People simply don't know that 51 percent of their power comes from it. They don't know how it's made. They don't know what prices miners pay for that convenience they take for granted."

Congressional leaders are not alone. Throughout the nation, most people really have no idea where their energy comes from. And to be honest, most don't really know what coal is.

It's something both sides of the coal debate have encountered.

"The fact that more than half the nation's electricity comes from coal -- people are clueless about it," said Vivian Stockman, outreach coordinator with the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, a group that works with coalfield residents who are impacted by mining and mining practices.

Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association, may be at the other end of the mining debate spectrum from OVEC, but he has experienced the same sort of misunderstanding about coal.

"Some people when you ask them (where electricity comes from), they think it comes out of a switch on the wall. They just don't think about that kind of thing in their everyday life," Raney said.

That lack of understanding makes some people worry about the state's future.

Kevin Leydon, director of the West Virginia University Institute for Public Affairs, said coal's lack of image leaves it open to people who want to mold the image into anything they want. That makes it easy to label coal as the big bad guy, much like tobacco was in the 1990s, he said.

"They can become demonized by some political actors outside the state who want someone to blame for, let's say, global warming," said Leydon, a political scientist whose research includes developing cities that are more friendly to walkers and bikers and less dependent on people driving everywhere.

"If you're thinking ahead, you're thinking about innovative ways you can be part of the solution. Coal's important, but how do we work on not just our image but our actions to help us to mitigate that fact."

He said the different between tobacco and coal is that coal provides energy and electricity.

"So the analogy is not perfect," he said. "I'm just saying we don't want them to become demonized by some forces that don't understand coal. So, in a sense, it's easier for coal because we need coal. It produces a whole lot of our energy. It's just that it's important to get out ahead of this."

Raney said the industry is starting to do a better job of creating an image for itself, but when the issue turns to global warming and greenhouse gases, politicians and journalists demanding action quell the coal industry's voice.

"I think they are all scratching at one another to see who can get to the forefront the quickest," he said, "which is the scariest thing about all of this because I think they are leaving science on the sideline when they do that."

He said he believes the most important aspect of any carbon regulation is to make sure it doesn't disrupt the economy or displace coal workers.

That's a position Rockefeller and U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall are trying to embrace. But unlike Raney, who said he does not really know what is causing the fluctuations in global temperatures, both Rockefeller and Rahall said they are positive global warming can be blamed on burning fossil fuels.

However, both men said their top priority is protecting West Virginia's interests and all of the people whose careers depend on coal. How do they plan to do that?

Rockefeller said he would like to see more coal companies capture the coal bed methane that escapes into the atmosphere. Methane, like carbon dioxide, is a greenhouse gas.

He said he also thinks there are more efficient ways to transport coal nationally, including possibly hooking up to the national transportation fuel pipeline.

"We've never been hooked up to it, and it's a way to distribute coal nationally," said Rockefeller, who came under some fire this fall after he and fellow senator, Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, sent a letter to an ExxonMobil executive telling him to quit funneling money to scientists whose research tried to disprove global warming.

Rockefeller and Rahall both would like to see more movement on clean-coal power plants and coal liquefaction. They said if coal companies can't afford to pay for all of the research, the federal government might have to cough up some money, offer loan guarantees or set price guarantees.

"We need new and innovative ways to burn coal," Rahall said.

That's not really what environmentalists want to hear. They say liquefying and gasifying coal will be as dirty as the traditional process of burning it. And they say that still doesn't address the problems facing people who live near active mines.

"Coal is dirty," said Chuck Nelson who also works with OVEC. "It's dirty when you dig it, dirty when you haul it, dirty when you burn it. ... Folks in the city just don't see the impacts that mining has."

But the environmental groups, Rockefeller and Rahall all have one thing in common -- they have little patience for people who deny global warming's existence.

"Those that want to fight us, they'll be on the menu instead of at the table," Rahall said.

He said it's inevitable that some kind of carbon regulation will go into effect, so he suggests West Virginians embrace the idea and start helping to shape how the regulations will look.

"It's when we stick our heads in the sand and not acknowledge reality that we risk the biggest losses," he said. "Lots of states have already taken action. We can't have a patchwork approach. We can't let that happen because it puts us in jeopardy. So let's step up and be cognizant enough to recognize what's going on."

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