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Coal Company Closures and the Future of Energy (/full-blog/2012/08/coal-company-closures-and-future-of.html)

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Image Source (<http://staffenvironment.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/pollution.jpg>)

By: Vanessa Rogers, Staff Member

Many utility companies have switched from coal to natural gas.[1] More than 100 of the 500 coal-burning power plants in the United States are expected to close in the next few years.[2] "Power plants that burn coal produce more than 90 times as much sulfur dioxide, five times as much

nitrogen oxide and twice as much carbon dioxide as those that run on natural gas.”[3] Sulfur dioxide causes acid rain; nitrogen oxides cause smog; and carbon dioxide traps heat in the atmosphere.”[4] Natural gas plants, on the other hand, emit almost no harmful toxins.[5] Many blame the switch to environmental friendly energy on the tough environmental regulations that have been implemented.[6] However, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said that coal is still expected to generate more of the country’s electricity than any other fuel source.[7]

Despite the dispute over why coal companies are shutting down, one thing is for certain, coal company closures caused many to lose their jobs.[8] A month ago one of the world’s largest coal producers, Arch Coal Inc., said it would lay off about 750 workers in Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia coalfields.[9] Almost 600 of those cuts are in Kentucky.[10] Perry County has estimated a loss of about 30% of its mining jobs in the last year.[11] There are predictions that the share of U.S. electricity coming from coal will fall below 40% for the year, the lowest since the forecasts that the government began collecting data in 1949.[12]

So what does all of this mean for the future of energy? “One of the big issues with the EPA rules is that with all these coal plants coming off-line in 2015, even if natural gas prices are reasonable we just don’t have the pipeline capacity to get it where you need it,” said Jeffrey R. Holmstead, a former assistant administrator for the U.S. EPA and current head of the Environmental Strategies Group of Bracewell-Giuliani, which advocates for the coal industry.[13] Because natural gas has a much lower carbon emissions, it can meet the recently-announced EPA proposed greenhouse gas standards while conventional coal plants could not, if the proposal passes.[14] In addition, coal companies may take their businesses overseas. Some coal producers, such as Arch Coal Inc., have already done so. Overseas, coal power plants are being built faster than they are being abandoned in the United States.[15]

[1] Bruce Schweinet, *Mine Layoffs Latest Sign of Coal Industry’s Decline*, LJWORLD.COM (June 22, 2012), <http://m.ljworld.com/news/2012/jun/22/mine-layoffs-latest-sign-coal-industry-decline/>.

[2] Erik Lipton, *Even in Coal Country, the Fight for an Industry*, NY TIMES (May 29, 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/30/business/energy-environment/even-in-kentucky-coal-industry-is-under-siege.html?pagewanted=all>.

[3] Schweinet, *supra* note 1.

[4] *Id.*

[5] Kari Lydersen, *Is Natural Gas Killing Coal?* MIDWEST ENERGY NEWS (April 17, 2012), <http://www.midwestenergynews.com/2012/04/17/is-natural-gas-killing-coal/>.

[6] Schweinet, *supra* note 1.

[7] *Id.*

[8] *Id.*

[9] *Id.*

[10] *Id.*

[11] *Id.*

[12] Bruce Schweinet, *Mine Layoffs Latest Sign of Coal Industry’s Decline*, LJWORLD.COM, <http://m.ljworld.com/news/2012/jun/22/mine-layoffs-latest-sign-coal-industry-decline/> (June 22, 2012).

[13] Lydersen, *supra* note 5.

[14] *Id.*

[15] Lipton, *supra* note 2.

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