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America's coal war

[Cathy Kunkel](#)

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As the US row over mountaintop mining rages on, Cathy Kunkel urges politicians in West Virginia to embrace a more sustainable future.



In January 2011, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provoked an [outcry](#) in West Virginia, America's second-largest coal-producing state, by denying a [valley-fill permit](#) – a crucial piece of permission – to what would have been the largest [mountaintop removal mining](#) operation in the country, the [Spruce No. 1 Mine](#).

The vast coal resources of [West Virginia](#), in the eastern United States, have played an important part in the state's history. Lying in the heart of the central [Appalachian](#) coal-producing region, they have long contributed significantly to the country's coal production. In 2009, West Virginia accounted for 13% of total US coal output. Although the coal industry accounts for less than 3% of West Virginia's total labour force, this statistic masks the impact of the coal industry on the rural economies where coal extraction occurs; in West Virginia's top coal-producing county, the coal industry employs about 40% of the workforce.

Like many regions of the world that are dominated by an extractive industry, West Virginia's natural resource wealth has done little to benefit local people, while also locking the state into the belief it is dependent upon coal. West Virginia is the [second poorest state](#) in the nation by median household income, and the coal-producing counties are consistently the poorest in the state. Yet in those same counties, support for the coal industry is strong because of the lack of other economic options. The reaction to the EPA's veto of the Spruce No. 1 mountaintop-removal mine is merely the latest manifestation of this mindset among West Virginia's political leadership.

Mountaintop-removal mining is a relatively new form of coal mining that started in [Appalachia](#) in the 1970s as an extension of traditional [strip-mining](#) techniques and has become increasingly prevalent in the past two decades. Mountaintop removal involves blasting up to 800 vertical feet (244 metres) of mountaintop and dumping the loose rock into an adjacent valley, creating what is called a "valley fill".

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Mining permits in the United States come under the jurisdiction of state governments, but permits for valley fills fall under the federal [Clean Water Act](#) (because valley fills typically bury streams) and hence are subject to review by the EPA. The recent veto of the valley fills for Spruce No. 1 Mine, which essentially prevents mountaintop removal from occurring at that site, is the first time that the EPA has actually used its authority to veto a valley fill.

In response, the governor of West Virginia hosted a "[Rally for Coal](#)" at the state government building; all of the members of West Virginia's Congressional delegation issued press releases denouncing the EPA; the West Virginia legislature introduced a bill that would ban federal regulation of coal mined and used within the state; and West Virginia congressmen introduced federal legislation that would prevent the EPA from vetoing valley-fill permits.

This reaction to the EPA's decision highlights the extent to which West Virginia's political leadership views coal as integral to the state's economy and future. Not surprisingly, West Virginia's politicians also receive significant campaign funds from the coal industry. In 2004, the coal industry accounted for 8% of total campaign contributions in state legislative elections – dwarfing any other energy or environmental interest groups. More than a quarter of West Virginia candidates for the senate, the upper house of Congress, received more money from the coal industry than from any other special interest group.

Lack of economic diversification in the coal-producing regions of West Virginia contributes to both the domination of the political process by industry and the perception there is no future other than coal.

But a transition away from coal will happen, whether the state is prepared for it or not. Although the coal industry and politicians like to perpetuate the idea that federal regulation is strangling the sector, the reasons for the decline of central Appalachian coal production are more fundamental. Despite the fact that West Virginia's recoverable reserves could last almost 130 years at current levels of production, economics are driving a decline in production. Central Appalachian coal is losing out to cheaper coal from the interior region (primarily the [Illinois Basin](#)) and the west (primarily from large-scale surface mines in Wyoming's [Powder River Basin](#)).

The [US Energy Information Administration](#) projects that central Appalachian coal production will decline by 49% by 2035. It is more expensive than western coal because the cheapest, most accessible product has already been extracted; the mining industry has resorted to more destructive practices like mountaintop removal to mine additional fuel.

In addition to competition with coal from other basins, demand for central Appalachian coal is also feeling the effects of cheap natural gas prices, which have led to fuel switching at many power plants. From 2000 to 2008, the growth in electricity consumption (until the recent recession) was supplied largely by the [growth in natural gas](#); coal remained essentially constant. Overall, US coal production is not expected to return to 2008 levels until 2024.

Despite the implications of these trends for the future of coal mining in West Virginia, the historical dependency on the mines and the political power of the sector have made it challenging to have a serious conversation about transitioning the relevant regions away from coal. But, despite the lack of political action, there has been a quiet and growing movement looking for ways to diversify local economies. Some efforts focus on training a new workforce for jobs in existing industries; for example, community colleges in southern West Virginia offer training courses ranging from home [weatherisation](#) to repairing power lines.

Other organisations are focused on longer term sustainable development of the region's existing assets. A local group in southern West Virginia has organised development of a community centre that includes a community kitchen, greenhouse and business incubator; the plan is that over time, by building on the interests and skills of local people, the centre will foster the development of small businesses and local agriculture in the area. Throughout central Appalachia, there are many such community-oriented development ventures focused on developing a sustainable economy based on the region's natural resources by supporting the expansion of local agriculture,

sustainable forestry and non-timber forest products.

One of the goals of these initiatives is to increase regional capacity for creating value-added products from these resources, rather than simply exporting them. A major challenge to creating sustainable economies is that, by their very nature, they are localised to the culture and assets of each region, and dependent on the skills and interests of local people. There is no silver bullet to economic diversification.

But unfortunately, these initiatives lack broader policy support, due to the pro-coal stance of the state's leading politicians. Some analysts and activists have argued that some of the region's coal wealth should be set aside to prepare for the future. This could entail increasing the [severance tax](#) – a tax imposed by the state on the extraction of natural resources – on coal or re-directing some of the existing severance tax revenue into an economic diversification trust fund for coal-producing counties.

Land reform is another area where policy intervention is needed. Much of the land across the coalfields of Appalachia is owned by coal corporations and absentee land-holding corporations, limiting the ability of the people to make use of the region's natural resources. At the time of the last comprehensive [study](#) of land ownership patterns in Appalachia, done in 1981, nearly 60% of West Virginia's land was owned by landholding corporations. Policy intervention will be necessary to support a return of the land to more local control.

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