

Why Trump's Promise to Save the Coal Industry Does More Damage Than Good



Donald Trump has promised repeatedly throughout his campaign to save the U.S. coal industry after years of bankruptcies and dwindling job prospects for coal miners. On Tuesday, he stood before a crowd in Virginia with "Trump Digs Coal" signs and declared that he was the "last shot for the miners."

But experts say Trump's plan, to the extent that he has one, is removed from the tough economic reality of coal, which has been forced to compete with the declining price of alternatives like natural gas and renewable energy sources, even as federal regulations push the U.S. away from fossil fuels. And many believe that Trump's possibly futile focus on saving the coal industry detracts attention from the real proposals needed to help coal workers transition into new jobs in a new industry. "We really want the solar industry to come to the table now and find ways to get more jobs going in some of these communities that need jobs," says Van Jones, an environmental activist who served as President Obama's first-term green jobs czar. "If we're concerned about coal country, and I am, we have to do a lot more than just yell."

U.S. mines produced about 900 million tons of coal last year, a nearly 25% decline since 2008 and the lowest amount of production since 1986, according to data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA). The change has come as energy companies have built up their natural gas and renewable capacity. The decline in coal production has led the industry to hemorrhage workers, with 50,000 coal-related jobs lost between 2008 and 2012, according to a study from last year. And that's just the latest in a downward slope in the industry since the 1980s due to mechanization that displaced human labor. The coal mining industry directly employed more than 140,000 in 1989 and only 85,000 a decade later, according to a Bureau of Labor Statistics report.

Experts agree that reversing that trend would be next to impossible without huge subsidies for the industry, as it is changing market factors—more than government policy—that has driven the decline in coal production. The development of fracking has expanded dramatically the availability of natural gas, making the largely cleaner fuel source cheaper than coal in most cases.

And, in recent years, renewable energy sources like wind and solar have become cost-competitive with coal in many places. But Trump and many Republicans place the blame for the loss of coal jobs on President Obama's "war on coal." Indeed, Trump's plan to revive coal mostly revolves around removing existing regulations. "We're going to save the coal industry and other industries threatened by Hillary Clinton's extremist agenda," he said at during an energy policy speech in May. "Any regulation that is outdated, unnecessary, bad for workers, or contrary to the national interest will be scrapped." Trump's campaign did not return a request for comment Friday.

Undoubtedly, regulations from his Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have contributed to reduced demand for coal. The Clean Power Plan, for instance, sets standards that will require many states to phase out coal-fired power plants if implemented. But the regulations merely expedite a trend already in progress.

There is hope for coal workers losing their job—or at least there could be. The number of jobs in renewable energy, particularly wind and solar, has skyrocketed even as the number of coal jobs has dwindled. The solar industry alone employs more than 200,000 people and has been growing at a rate of 20% annually, according to a report from the Solar Foundation. Another 80,000 were employed in the wind industry with similar levels of growth, according to data from the American Wind Energy Association.

A new study published in the journal Energy Economics found that most coal employees could be retrained for similar jobs in the solar industry with relatively little investment. Researchers behind the study, which relied on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, compared a job in the coal industry with its closest equivalent in the solar industry. The solar industry could easily absorb the expected job losses and many employees might even see a salary increase, according to the research.

"There are not that many more jobs coming in the coal mines, period. There aren't that many jobs coming on oil rigs, period," says Jones. "At some point we have to accept the fact that the clean energy companies are growing faster than everything else."

Many politicians and policymakers have proposed programs to help coal workers transition into these jobs. President Obama's recent budget requests have included billions of dollars for a variety of programs to aid communities hurt by the declining coal industry, including job transition initiatives. Some of those programs have received funding from Congress, like the POWER program that provides economic development grants to affected areas. Other proposals for coal communities have gone unfunded.

Despite a gaffe where Hillary Clinton said she would "put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business," Clinton herself has a fairly expansive plan to aid hurting coal communities with a price tag of \$30 billion. That includes providing health care benefits to former miners, investing in job education and repurposing old coal infrastructure for clean tech. Clinton's plans may not be perfect. A West Virginia Coal Association executive described it as an insufficient "care package." But the reality is that America is already moving past coal, for environmental and economic reasons. If Trump "digs coal" and the people who actually dig it, he'll need to figure out a way to make sure those workers aren't left behind.

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