

THE HIGH COST OF CHEAP COAL¹

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Monday's mining disaster in Raleigh County, W. Va.—in which a massive explosion killed at least 25 miners, with four still missing—is a grim reminder of coal's hidden costs. Coal, according to conventional wisdom, is the cheapest available source of energy—a bargain when compared to renewables such as wind and solar, as well as to oil and natural gas. But Monday's explosion is, unfortunately, only the latest evidence of the high price we really pay for coal. According to the Mine Safety and Health Administration, 104,674 people died in coal mining disasters in the United States between 1900 and 2009. Though death rates have slowed dramatically in recent decades, the years between 2001 and 2005—a period that included two record-setting years for lowest mining fatalities in history—still saw an average of 30 coal mining deaths each year.

And these numbers don't reflect other human costs of coal mining. A 2008 study found that people living in mining communities are 70 percent more likely to develop kidney disease, 64 percent more likely to have chronic lung diseases such as emphysema, and 30 percent more likely to report hypertension. Those who live near coal-burning power plants are also at higher risk. It's difficult to put a dollar value on human lives or the health of communities—but at the very least, shouldn't hospital visits and disability coverage be factored into the cost of coal?

Then there are the environmental costs of mining and burning coal. In testimony before the Iowa Utilities Board, NASA scientist James Hansen called coal “the largest contributor to the human-made increase of CO₂ in the air,” a major cause of global climatic changes that have already displaced an estimated 26 million people. A 2008 study that projected the price tag of climate change in eight U.S. states found that rising sea levels, temperature changes, and drought will have devastating impacts. “Climate change will cost billions in the long run and the bottom line will be red,” said Matthias Ruth, director of the Center for Integrative Environmental Research at the University of Maryland and coordinator of the study. “Inaction or delayed action will make the ink run redder.” Coal may be cheap now, but that's simply because we're not counting—and don't even know how to count—the long-term costs.

In Kingston, Tenn., not far from where I grew up, fly ash left over from a coal-fired power plant was stored behind an earthen dam. When the dam ruptured in 2008, houses and farms were destroyed as sludge laced with arsenic, uranium, and mercury flooded 300 acres.

Massey Energy, the same company that operates the mine in Raleigh County where yesterday's explosion occurred, stores 8.2 billion gallons of toxic coal sludge behind an earthen impoundment in another part of the county: a constant reminder for local residents that what's cheap today may be very expensive tomorrow. In February, West Virginia's Department of Environmental Protection issued a notice of violation because the dam failed to meet safety requirements.

So it's not surprising that many residents of Raleigh County have been fighting for a future free from coal. They formed a group called the Coal River Mountain Wind Project and commissioned a study to compare the impact of Massey Energy's proposed mountaintop-removal surface coal mine with that of their proposed alternative: a 328 megawatt wind farm. The study found that

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wind would bring the county government \$1.7 million in annual revenue indefinitely. Mountaintop removal would bring in merely \$36,000 each year for 17 years—while costing an estimated \$600 million in health expenses and lost resources following the destruction of the mountain.

Coal River Mountain residents aren't alone in recalculating the true cost of coal and deciding it's simply too high to pay. The Sierra Club lists 127 proposed coal plants in the United States that have been canceled, abandoned, or put on hold in recent years; in a number of cases, activist pressure or market forces compelled companies to abandon coal in favor of other energy sources.

Of course, the belief that "Coal is still the least-cost, most viable, and technically feasible option" (as World Bank president Robert B. Zoellick put it in a letter to U.S. lawmakers who challenged a \$3 billion Bank loan to build a coal-fired power plant in South Africa) is still widespread. But even in South Africa, where power shortages have been a serious issue in recent years, there are some who don't believe coal power is cheap enough to be worth its hidden costs.

Residents of South Africa's Limpopo Province, together with Earthlife Africa and groundWork, yesterday filed a complaint with the World Bank Inspection Panel—a forum for claims from those adversely affected by the Bank's policies—to stop the construction of the plant on the grounds that it would threaten their water, health, and farms. Even among members of the Bank's board, which will vote on funding for the coal plant this Thursday, the decision is unusually contentious, with the United States likely to abstain or even cast a rare "no" vote. According to an article in *The New York Times*, analysts say the debate "is sending a strong signal that the World Bank will have to do more to encourage renewable energy and may even have to sideline loans for future coal plants." The myth of cheap coal can't stand up to the sad evidence of coal's hidden costs to our lives, our health, and our planet.