**EPA’s Carbon Standard and the Failure of West Virginia’s Leadership**

The Sept. 20 announcement by EPA that new power plants would have to meet an emissions standard for carbon dioxide has been maligned by most of West Virginia’s political leadership, but it is actually an important and necessary step forward. EPA rules would set limits for carbon emissions that would require some type of carbon capture technology for new coal-fired power plants.

In response to the EPA announcement, Senator Joe Manchin said: “Never before has the federal government forced an industry to do something that is technologically impossible.” But on May 4, 2009, then Governor Manchin said in a statement regarding the carbon capture permit issued for the Mountaineer plant in New Haven, WV, that “Carbon capturing is important to ensuring our energy independence, ..,.” and “That technology is here, today,….”.

Why was it “here” four years ago, but is now “impossible”.

Manchin also said “If these regulations go into effect, American jobs will be lost, electricity prices will soar, and economic uncertainty will grow….”. But the EPA’s announcement stated what is already widely known. Thanks to low natural gas prices, declining costs for renewables, and dramatic savings through energy efficiency, almost no one is building new coal-fired power plants anymore, so the rules will not affect electricity prices. The last plant to be built in West Virginia, Longview, declared bankruptcy last month, primarily due to low electricity prices and poor market conditions.

Congressman Rahall also raised the “higher energy bills” claim.

Yet both Manchin and Rahall voted in support of the nearly 100 billion dollars in emergency relief for 2012 weather-related emergencies such as Superstorm Sandy and western wildfires. Most economists agree that the costs of climate change will be much higher than the costs of cleaning up carbon pollution.

But as bad as these comments from Democrats are, those from Republicans were even worse. Representative Shelley Moore Capito said the EPA rules are a sign that the Obama Administration “simply doesn’t care…”, while Rep. David McKinley flat out said that the limits “cannot be achieved”, even though demonstration plants such as Mountaineer have already been operating.

Even those statements pale in comparison to the whopper McKinley told to a Congressional hearing last week when he said “Over 40 years, there's been almost no increase in temperatures, very slight." Temperature increases over the last 40 years have been unprecedented, and virtually every scientist has confirmed those dramatic increases.

Contrast these outlandish statements with the observation from Ted Boettner, director of the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy: "The scariest thing is not the proposed EPA regulations. It is that many state leaders have offered no alternative plans to help the state transition from the structural decline of coal that will hurt many West Virginia working families regardless of EPA rules."

A sensible response to the EPA rules and the other challenges facing the coal industry would be to diversify the state’s economy. The current approach to climate change by our political leaders, stick your head in the sand, deny reality, and “blame the messenger”, is a disservice to the citizens of West Virginia. Longing for the “good ole days” is not leadership.

We cannot pretend that the EPA rules are without impact, and any serious climate change proposal that ignores the job impacts to mine workers is unfair and unjust. But so is lying about the many other challenges facing the coal industry, in a vain hope that the coal companies’ political contributions will be enough to keep getting re-elected. Leaders that are serious about looking out for the welfare of West Virginians will begin by telling the truth.

West Virginia needs to aggressively promote alternatives to coal. West Virginia ratepayers deserve an aggressive energy efficiency program to create jobs and help reduce electric bills. And EPA’s carbon emissions standards need to be tightened, not fought, especially for natural gas-fired power plants, so we do not invest in a whole new generation of fossil fuel plants that will simply repeat these same battles a generation from now.

That is where West Virginia needs to go, and where the rest of America is headed. I hope our “leaders” will follow.

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