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Ned Helme: Less coal means more jobs

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Politicians are attacking President Obama's policies to reduce carbon pollution as a "war on coal." But the evidence is clear that relying on coal is harmful to both the economic and public health of localities and their citizens. Reducing dependence on coal can also increase the number of well-paying jobs.

Pursuing cleaner alternatives like natural gas would create new jobs not just in the energy sector but also in allied industries that use natural gas, such as specialty steel and pipe production. Other alternative energy sources such as solar, wind, hydro and combined heat-and-power systems also generate not just electricity but new jobs. That's good news for coal-heavy states like West Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio.

President Obama clearly intends to put the brakes on coal and that makes good environmental sense. He has publicly asserted that climate change is a fact and that he and his environmental regulators will continue to work to curtail greenhouse gas emissions.

As a better path, he promoted the use of cleaner energy that comes from natural gas, from renewable fuels and from improved energy efficiency. He also called for more gas-powered manufacturing plants and the establishment of "Sustainable Shale Gas Growth Zones" to safely manage the rapid development of gas around the country.

The president won't get everything he wants. And coal won't disappear as a significant source of energy. But a shift to natural gas, renewables and efficiency and away from coal should not be a cause for concern. In fact, it can be a win-win even in coal-producing regions.

People's lives wouldn't be cut short by air pollution. The horror of mountaintop removal will be reduced. And lower-cost energy, particularly from gas, will spur new industries that will keep people employed for years to come.

Everyone would benefit if mountaintop removal is diminished. A 2011 study found that six types of birth defects occurred more frequently in areas near mountaintop removal mines. A separate study that year concluded that residents in counties with mountaintop removal coal mining reported an average of 18 more unhealthy days (poor physical, mental and activity limitation) per year as compared to other counties. And our mountain rivers will no longer be choked with rock and debris.

"The economic benefits we are seeing today will last well into the next decade," said oil and gas expert Harry Vidas of ICF International. He forecasts a net increase of \$167 billion to \$245 billion in the nation's Gross Domestic Product in 2017 -- and between 835,000 and 1.6 million new jobs -- because of the natural gas boom.

According to Vidas' ICF study, which was published in 2012 by the American Clean Skies Foundation, Texas should see a gain of up to 236,000 jobs and Pennsylvania up to 145,000 jobs. Even states without significant shale gas resources are expected to gain tens of thousands of jobs due to supply chain businesses. Examples include Florida (59,000 jobs), New Jersey (36,000 jobs), and Missouri (21,000 jobs). Employment in Ohio was predicted to rise by between 42,900 and 84,000 jobs by 2017.

Other studies verify these predictions. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Institute for 21st Century Energy predicts that the Marcellus Shale region will produce 30,000 West Virginia jobs by 2020 and 58,000 by 2035 -- vastly outstripping declines in the coal industry. Research firm IHS estimates that as many as 3.8 million new jobs will be created by 2025 in the U.S. that are either directly or indirectly related to the natural gas industry.

The extra work is expected to come in far-flung fields including gas and liquids pipelines, gas processing plants, petrochemical plants, steel manufacturing, sand mining, ammonia production, methanol production and liquefied natural gas export terminals.

Studies have shown that, in general, the renewable energy sector generates more jobs per megawatt of power installed, per unit of energy produced, and per dollar of investment, than the fossil fuel-based energy sector. Combined heat and power technologies create direct jobs in manufacturing, engineering, installation and maintenance as well as indirect jobs up and down the supply chain.

West Virginia has already seen some of this growth; a steel plant across the border in Youngstown is back in production. Elsewhere in the country, steel mills are firing up with coke batteries and blast furnaces as part of direct-reduced iron (DRI) plants. The plants produce at relatively low cost so-called sponge iron -- the product of direct reduction of iron ore and gas -- which is one of the hottest materials in the construction industry today.

Coal will -- and should -- recede as a source of energy. New energy sources will yield long-term gains -- an increase in jobs and in the improved health of the citizens of coal country and the nation as a whole.

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