

Maybe We Should Treat the Coal Industry Like the Tobacco Industry

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Cigarette. (Photo Credit: Pixabay)

Arguments by both sides on weaning the United States from its dependence upon coal appear to have some similarities to the arguments that were bantered about during the 1980s and 1990s on the harmful effects of smoking and the consequences to tobacco farmers should the industry become regulated by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA).

There were also subsequent arguments concerning raising taxes on cigarettes, as it would disproportionately affect the lower- and middle-class (the dominant tobacco users, according to surveys). The tobacco companies launched probably the most costly and aggressive campaign in corporate history to question the science behind the harmful effects of smoking, and secondary smoke. As regulations on Capitol Hill were being proposed and argued, politicians opposed to regulating the tobacco industry questioned the medical science citing tobacco's harmful effects.

Mitch McConnell Rallies for Big Tobacco

In 1993, it was proposed that smoking be banned in Federal buildings. Mitch McConnell, Republican Senator from Kentucky, was quoted as saying, "There clearly is insufficient science or logic to justify this extreme action." In his support of the tobacco industry, Senator McConnell sent multiple letters to regulators questioning the science behind efforts to curb indoor smoking – with his talking points and arguments being provided to him by the tobacco industry. On climate change, he [seems to have taken a similar position and tack](#), continuing to question the science behind climate change, and fighting through filibusters, lawsuits, and [rallying his fellow Republicans](#) to fight against the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) attempts [to control emissions from coal-fired power plants](#).

ALEC & the US Chamber of Commerce Do Too



Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY)

Though one would have thought the argument about the health effects of smoking tobacco was a resolved issue, even today one of the leading conservative think tanks, The Heartland Institute (in an April 3, 2011 [essay on their website](#)) made the accusation that, "...The public health community's campaign to demonize smokers and all forms of tobacco is based on junk science." Consistent with this attitude, the Heartland Institute is one of the loudest voices [disputing the science underlining climate change](#).

Other organization, such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and [ALEC](#), have a deep history of supporting the tobacco industry. The Chamber was recently accused of promoting the

use of tobacco products worldwide in a June 30, 2015 [New York Times article](#). The Chamber's response was to defend its role in fighting legislation that might make it more difficult for its members to sell their product, justifying its actions as consistent with their mandate to protect its members' business interests wherever they might be in the world.



A field of tobacco plants on a farm in Clover, Virginia. (Photo Credit: EMW / Wikimedia Commons)

ALEC has historically functioned as a mouth piece for tobacco companies, sending out position papers partly or wholly drafted by the industry. The organization was an extremely vocal and active opponent of having the FDA regulate tobacco, and also [questions the prevailing science](#) attributing much of climate change to human activity, financing a number of negative ad campaigns against legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and renewable energy (see my article, "[Deja View All Over Again](#)").

Much of the evidence for these individuals' and organizations' historic support of the tobacco industry can be found at the University of California, San Francisco Legacy Tobacco Document Library:

<https://industrydocuments.library.ucsf.edu/tobacco/>.

Now They're At It Again

From these same people and institutions we now have the dire warnings of the harm to coal miners and the lower- and middle-class (concerning the inevitable increase of the cost of electricity) if utilities are forced to shut down or clean up coal-fired power plants.



Emissions from the Fisk Generating Station, a coal-fired electric generating station in Chicago, Illinois. (Photo Credit: Señor Codo / Flickr)

It is amusing to see the same poster children utilized by both the tobacco and coal industries (i.e., farmers and coal miners, lower- and middle-class citizens). No doubt this is because they present a far more sympathetic picture than large tobacco, coal companies, and utility companies (e.g., RJR Reynolds, Massey Energy, and Duke Energy).

Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican and Majority leader of the Senate, has by happenstance become the political face over the years for both tobacco and coal – possibly because his state is one of the top producers of tobacco and the largest user of coal for the generation of electricity, at **93 percent** (it ranks 3rd as a coal producer, behind Wyoming and West Virginia, and supplies eight percent of the coal used in the U.S.). As McConnell saw what he thought would be the inevitable collapse of the tobacco industry; as more and more legislation was passed to discourage tobacco use; and as public sentiment increasingly turned against smoking; he became a proponent of putting into place a compensation program for tobacco farmers to cushion their loss of livelihood.

With practically every state of the union suing the tobacco industry, the industry sought a global settlement with all the states. As part of this settlement, the National Tobacco Grower Settlement Trust Fund was created. Funded from the monetary settlement with the tobacco industry, the NTGSTF was to compensate tobacco growers for their anticipated future loss of revenues. Farmers eligible to receive compensation from this fund included those from the

states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. Though the formulas for compensation were somewhat complex, the result was a fund of \$5.5 billion to be funded over a 12-year period for the benefit of tobacco farmers.



Farmers inspect their crop in Rockingham County, Virginia. (Photo Credit: Bob Nichols / U.S. Department of Agriculture)

It took decades for the U.S. government to take a policy stand on the harmful effects of tobacco and pass legislation to protect the general public, even with the plethora of supporting medical science behind it. Climate change legislation has seen a similar uphill battle, with – once again – the lopsided support of the scientific community ([97.1 percent](#)) believing that climate change is primarily attributable to human activity.

The Inevitable Decline of Coal and Tobacco

The movements to curtail the use of tobacco products and that of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from power plants are both proven health issues. Both sides agree that it would be better for the health of society to reduce toxic emissions from power plants, but those fighting it argue that the financial impacts (i.e., devastated local economies, employment in the coal industry and harm to the lower- and middle-class vis a vis increased electricity rates) cannot justify the “drastic measures” the EPA’s regulations propose. Yet the pro-regulation argument has also used the financial impact to show that reduced medical costs, increased productivity, reduced mortality rates and the effects of climate change on society, justify the emission reductions proposed by the EPA.

And now back to the poster children for the opponents of power plant emission reductions. The National Mining Association and the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates the number of people employed by the coal industry at under 90,000 people nationwide. If you add in people employed in ancillary roles (approximately 60,000 coal power plant operators, another 30,000 involved in the transport of coal) the total people directly supported by the coal industry is likely in the 180,000 range. (The solar industry, as of 2014, directly employed [over 173,000.](#))

The average miner is 45-years-old and has worked in the mines for approximately 16 years. For a miner who worked in the industry prior to January 1, 2012, under certain conditions he or she would qualify for retirement benefits at 55 with 20 years of service. Under most scenarios (except for miners who entered the industry post-

2012), the existing coal miner workforce would qualify for retirement benefits within 10 to 15 years. Providing a safety net to displaced coal miners, and some percentage of the other displaced workers, though costly, might be supportable.

The ripple effect to the local economies would be softened by the fact that these displaced workers would still be residing in their communities and, if on pensions, be receiving monthly checks equal if not larger than the average for these communities. Though they might not receive the \$80,000 annual paycheck, which is the mean for a working miner, they would probably be in the high range of the median household income for the three largest coal producing states, West Virginia being \$38,482, Kentucky \$41,141, and \$44,222 for Montana.



Men installing solar panels on the roof of the White House. (Photo Credit: Creative Commons)

With [declining demand for coal in the U.S.](#), and U.S. coal internationally, the foreseeable future is not encouraging if you are a coal miner. Seven coal mining companies in the U.S. have filed for bankruptcy in the last year, including the second largest, Alpha Natural Resources. It would behoove those states whose populace relies on coal to undertake a major diversification plan for their economies. Rather than fighting the inevitable (i.e., the shrinking of the coal industry), coal mining states should be aggressively exploring alternatives for their constituents and their states.



Coal miner. (Photo Credit: Creative Commons)

West Virginia and Kentucky are respectively the tenth and eighth least healthful states in the country. West Virginia ranks 49th in number of college graduates, Kentucky ranks 46th. Life expectancy in West Virginia ranks 50th, at 74.1, and Kentucky is 45th, at 74.7- years-old (compared to Minnesota's 86.2). I believe that if a poll was taken of graduating high schoolers in these states, given an alternative, they would not choose to go into the mines. Though not statistically the most dangerous job (ranking fifth on the scale, behind fishing, logging, aviation, farming and ranching), it is dangerous.

And though tough regulations were implemented to reduce black lung disease, the industry has seen [a surprising up-tick in its occurrence](#), the highest since the 1970s. After dropping from

afflicting 3.3 percent in 1974 to 0.4 percent in 1998, in West Virginia, Kentucky and Virginia, the rate is back up to 3.2 percent. It seems that from a health standpoint, for that of the coal miner and the downwind neighbors of coal plants, as well as the Earth, reducing the use of coal should not be a long-term objective, but a near-term one.

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