

Efforts to revive coal industry unlikely to work, may slow job growth

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Current federal efforts to revive the coal industry will likely do more harm than good to fragile Appalachian communities transitioning from coal as a major source of employment, according to a study conducted by Indiana University researchers.

Based on research involving focus groups and interviews in Appalachia, the research team reached these key conclusions about an industry that has seen employment drop by 71 percent since 1985:

- Rolling back environmental regulations will not lead to a significant resurgence of the [coal](#) industry because those regulations played only a minor role relative to slowing demand for electricity and a surge in cheaper, cleaner sources of energy.
- Promising coal communities a return of their jobs has the potential to fill them with false hope, which can threaten the very progress that has been made in launching job training programs and other transition steps.
- Government programs should focus on helping communities find and harness new economic and human development opportunities with a focus on health and education, professional growth, and public services.

Quotes from two participants in focus groups underscore the study's findings:

In reference to the decline of the coal industry, one former coal miner

said, "I can tell you what my grand-daddy always said: 'No matter how many times you beat and kick that dead horse, it's not getting up to plow again.'"

Another participant said, "I'm beginning to see some real enthusiasm, particularly among young people in small communities in West Virginia, to begin looking for something beyond, something beyond coal."

The researchers conducted interviews with former coal miners, religious leaders, economic development experts and many others in Virginia, Kentucky and West Virginia. The focus group discussions were held in Williamson and Ghent, West Virginia, and included miners who had been laid off, their families, part-time retail workers and others. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in July 2016.

One of the biggest challenges confronting coal communities, besides the need to develop new economic opportunities, is overcoming the deeply rooted culture of coal that has defined the lives of residents and full communities for generations.

"We found substantial evidence that Appalachian coal communities are working to shed the culture of coal and develop new opportunities and an evolving conception of identity based on these opportunities," said researcher Sanya Carley of IU's School of Public and Environmental Affairs.

The researchers believe their findings have application outside coal country. Many communities in other parts of the country are also grappling with a transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy.

"The energy transition will have uneven impacts for individuals and communities, and it is critical that we develop strategies to assist those

most negatively affected," said SPEA researcher David Konisky, a co-author of the study.

Carley, Konisky and Tom Evans of the geography department in IU's College of Arts and Sciences published their findings, "Adaptation, culture, and the energy transition in American coal country," in the peer-reviewed journal *Energy Research and Social Science*.

More information: Sanya Carley et al, Adaptation, culture, and the energy transition in American coal country, *Energy Research & Social Science* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.erss.2017.10.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.10.007)

Provided by Indiana University

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