

EPA hears worries about climate in heart of coal country

November 28 2017, by John Raby And Michael Biesecker

After more than four decades as a coal miner, Stanley Sturgill ambled into an ornate room at West Virginia's state capitol Tuesday to deliver a stark message to the Trump administration: Climate change is real and continuing to burn the dirty fossil fuel hurts future generations.

He was among dozens who had their say at a public hearing over the intended repeal of an Obama-era plan to limit planet-warming carbon emissions. The Environmental Protection Agency was holding the only scheduled hearing on the policy reversal in Charleston, capital of a state heavily dependent on coal mining. The hearing was expected to last two days.

There were warnings from the other side, too—that the regulations threaten to choke off livelihoods in coal country and drive up people's energy costs. But despite the locale of the hearing, those concerned about climate change packed the hearing room.

Sturgill, who said he suffers from black lung disease, wanted the Clean Power Plan upheld for his three grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. He and his wife drove several hours from Lynch, Kentucky, to speak because "we may be old, but we still love living."

"Now to be realistic, do I really think that the administration cares what this old worn coal miner has to say?" asked Sturgill, 72, who conceded that his pro-environment views were not popular in his hometown. "I don't know. I really doubt it. But I had to be here, and as long as I can

draw a breath, I'm going to keep working to fight climate change and protect the land and country I love."

The Clean Power Plan sought to reduce use of the dirtiest fossil fuel but never took effect because of lawsuits filed by coal companies and conservative-leaning states. Coal-fired power plants are a major source of the carbon emissions driving climate change.

Among those testifying Tuesday was Bob Murray, chief executive Murray Energy Corp. He derided the Obama plan as an illegal power grab that has cost coal miners their jobs. About two dozen of Murray's employees sat in the audience, while still more miners attended pro-coal rallies outside the Capitol.

"The Clean Power Plan would devastate coal-fired electricity generation in America," said Murray, whose company employs 5,200 miners and has 14 active coal mines. "This would impose massive costs on the power sector and on American consumers."

West Virginia has been especially hit hard by the decades of decline in the coal industry, losing thousands of jobs. However, energy market analysts say the downturn in coal prices has been largely driven by competition from cheaper, cleaner burning natural gas, not government regulations.

American Petroleum Institute consultant Jack Harrison told EPA that any replacement of the Clean Power Plan "should contemplate states relying on natural gas" and new technologies that reduce emissions.

Under the Obama administration, EPA held four multiday public hearings—in Washington, Atlanta, Pittsburgh and Denver—to collect feedback before issuing the Clean Power Plan in 2015. About two dozen conservative-leaning states and a battery of fossil-fuel companies

immediately sued, preventing the carbon reduction plan from taking effect before the election of President Donald Trump, who as a candidate pledged to repeal it.

To head EPA, Trump appointed Scott Pruitt, a former Oklahoma attorney general who was among those who fought the Clean Power Plan in court. Pruitt has made it a priority to delay and reverse recent environmental regulations hurting the profits of coal and petrochemical companies.

Though Trump, Pruitt and others have blamed environmental regulations for the loss of coal-mining jobs, the accelerating shift of electric utilities using cheaper and cleaner-burning natural gas is a primary culprit.

Pruitt has also sought to cast doubt on the consensus of climate scientists that the continued burning of fossil fuels is the main driver of global warming. Scientists say climate change has already triggered rising seas and more extreme weather, including killer heat waves, worsened droughts and torrential rains.

Pruitt did not attend Tuesday's public hearing, which was presided over by EPA employees. But even with the hearing being held in the heart of coal country, most speakers said they supported limits on carbon emissions.

The Sierra Club's climate-policy director, Liz Perera, told them that the proposed repeal ignores scientific reality.

"This is about the kind of world that we want to leave for our children," she said.

Environmental activist Vicki Mattson of Athens, Ohio, said her home county has four solar power installation companies. Clean energy will

create well-paying new jobs, she said.

"We all need to look at solar and wind," Mattson said. "Clean power is the future. We can join the rest of the world or be left behind."

Sturgill, the retired miner, said the EPA under the Trump administration was protecting fossil-fuel industry profits at the expense of the environment and the health of Americans who have to breathe polluted air.

He recounted a Native American proverb, and urged the policy makers at EPA to take it to heart: "When the last tree is cut down, the last fish eaten, and the last stream poisoned, only then will you realize you cannot eat money."

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