

West Virginia seeks future—without coal

May 10 2017, by Heather Scott



A coal scraper machine on a pile of coal in New Haven, West Virginia on October 30, 2009

Chuck Nelson spent 30 years underground in nearly every mining job available but today he is in no doubt about it: "There is no future in coal."

For the fourth-generation retired miner, the politicians—Donald Trump chief among them—who won votes in his native West Virginia on a promise to bring back coal are peddling false hopes.

Economists agree: despite a recent uptick, few believe in a lasting revival for a sector that is ever more mechanized, requiring fewer workers, and pummeled by competition with cheap, clean natural gas.

So how does a small state with few other industries, where the biggest single employer is Wal-Mart, find a path to replace high-paying albeit dangerous mining jobs?

The "Mountain State" just west of the nation's capital long suffered from a condition known as "Dutch disease"—in economic parlance, the over-reliance on a single product, especially a natural resource, to the exclusion of other industries.

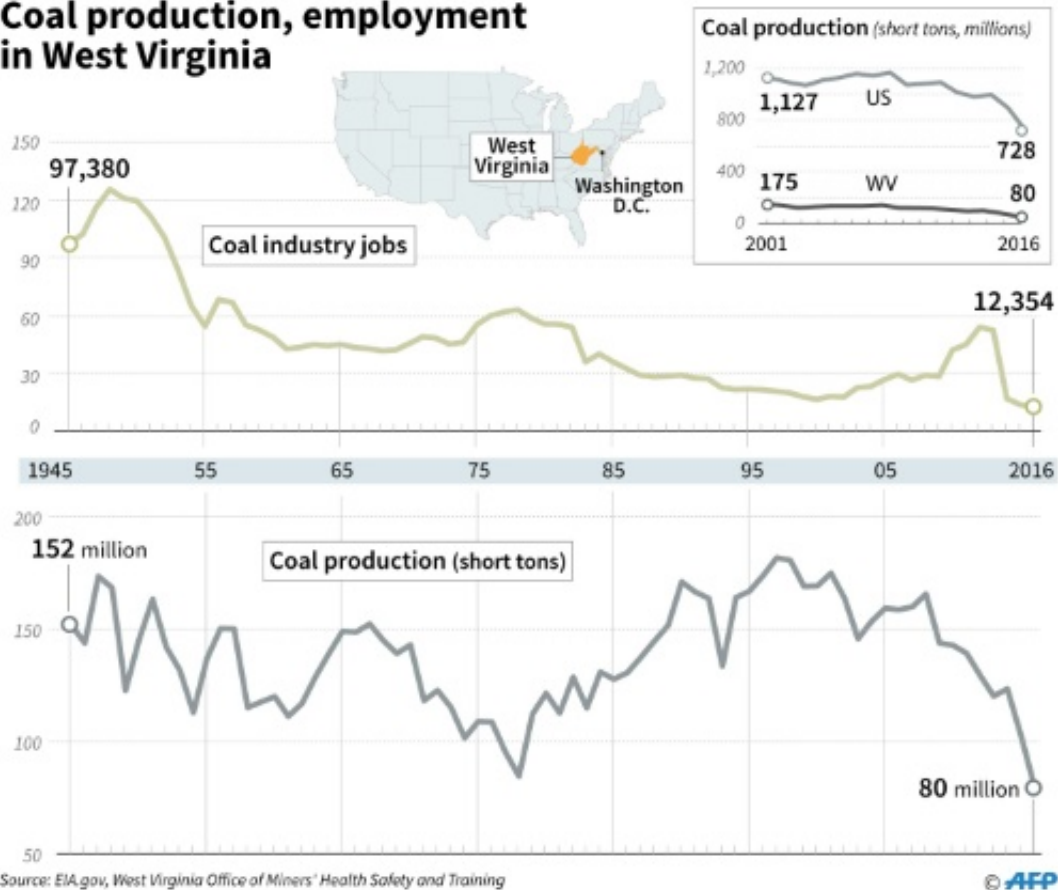
"When are we ever going to be economically free, not serfs to the [coal industry](#), unless there is economic diversity," asks the filmmaker Mari-Lynn Evans, whose documentary "Blood on the Mountain" explores the troubled history of the state's coal industry.

'Wild and wonderful'

If West Virginia has a competitive advantage besides coal, the most obvious is tourism. Skiing, hiking, white-water rafting and a well-known resort—site of the underground bunker intended to house the US government in the event of a nuclear war—make it a vacation destination.

Fuelled by a "wild and wonderful" ad campaign, tourism last year generated \$4.5 billion in travel spending making it the state's fourth largest industry.

Coal production, employment in West Virginia



A coal scraper machine on a pile of coal in New Haven, West Virginia on October 30, 2009

But mining companies have used bankruptcies to escape the obligation to restore damaged and polluted land, leaving the state with billions of dollars in restoration costs.

Maria Gunnoe lives in the shadow of a mountain-top removal site, just below a slurry pond filled with toxic mine waste. The dam broke a few years ago and just missed wiping out her house at the base of the hollow.

The environmental activist talks of catching fish with black ulcers on them, of waking up one morning to find the creek running white, and of

the neighbor girl who developed four kinds of cancer—well aware of studies that point to elevated rates of the disease.

"Our streams are spillways," says Gunnoe, who like many locals fears the environmental scars left by a dying industry now threaten one of their best chances at a brighter future.

'Renaissance'

Amid West Virginia's economic struggle, the state has been hard hit by America's opioid epidemic with the highest rate of overdose deaths in the country. Huntington, where 28 people overdosed, two fatally, in a single day last year, is considered the epicenter of the crisis.

But Huntington is also fighting to invent a new future for itself.

It was recently named "America's Best Community" winning a \$3 million redevelopment prize after a two-year competition against 50 other cities.

"We're on the verge of a renaissance," insists Mayor Steve Williams.



View of an unused coal mine at Black Mountain, Virginia, on April 18, 2017

That rebirth involves deploying high-speed internet—scarce in the remote state—turning blighted industrial areas into a new research and development park, and retraining dislocated workers in highly-skilled fields from solar and craft furniture, to organic farming on former strip mine sites.

Such revitalization, Williams says, is key to beating the opioid epidemic as well.

"If we're going to win on this we have to turn the economy," he says. "As you do that you start to attract investment, put people back to work and give them hope."

Inner colony

While it shares borders with traditional mining [states](#) like Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Virginia, West Virginia has perhaps more in common with former colonies, where foreign companies reaped the profits from diamonds or oil and left little to show for it.

More than two-thirds of its private land and mineral rights are owned by outside interests, according to the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy.

"It's a colony. It always has been," Ted Boettner, head of the budget center told AFP, who says the state has long been trapped in a "vicious cycle of boom and bust, with a very under-educated, under-invested economy."

Boettner points to states such as North Dakota and Alaska, that funneled tax revenue from their dominant industry into schools and other development—and hopes West Virginia can learn from their example.

West Virginia has "given more to the American dream than any other state," he says, "and received less in return."

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