

Sustainable Living: End of the coal era

by Shawn_Dell_Joyce

While it may seem hard for most of us to look beyond the economy right now, there are legions of young people with their eyes fixed on the planet's future. In Chicago, high-school students wearing respirator masks are hurdling over coal piles and racing past power plants in the 2009 Coal-Olympics competition. These community-minded young people are urging President Barack Obama to do something about the two coal plants nearby that are making their families sick and causing global warming.

"This may seem like an odd time to take to the streets," notes climate activist and author Bill McKibben. "After all, the new administration has done more in a month to fight global warming than all the presidents of the past 20 years." Climate activists across the country are hoping the new administration may actually listen and act to curb climate change and move beyond fossil fuels. A recent statement by President Obama announcing that his administration will base its decisions on sound science is heartening for scientists who were shut out and censored by the previous administration.

Among those scientists is NASA climatologist James Hansen, who has been warning our government for the past 20 years that carbon dioxide levels at more than 350 parts per million are "incompatible with the planet on which civilization developed." Right now, the carbon dioxide level is at 387 parts per million and rising. The window of opportunity to reverse this trend is closing quickly, and many people, including Hansen, believe we need to stop talking and start doing.

On the morning after President Obama's inauguration, 40 climate groups launched 100 Days of Action to Power Past Coal. Until the end of April, participants are lobbying their members of Congress to halt mountaintop removal, marching to stop new coal plants, and risking arrest in acts of civil disobedience. The Power Past Coal project culminated March 2, when 12,000 students convened on Capitol Hill for Power Shift 2009. Young people shut down the Capitol's coal-fired power plant for hours in "the largest climate demonstration in our nation's history," according to organizers.

The transition from coal to renewable energy sources needs to be complete by 2030 if we are to return the atmospheric carbon level to 350 ppm anytime soon.

But in communities built by coal, these statements have yet to make a difference. In Wise County, Virginia, residents protested a 1,300-acre mountaintop removal permit that would allow strip mining on Ison Rock Ridge, which would threaten six nearby communities.

"How much yelling is it going to take us before Obama admits coal is just plain dirty?" said Judy Bonds, the director of Coal River Mountain Watch in Whitesville, W.Va. "We're still fighting the same fight as we were 10 years ago. But now we have a chance to win." Bonds, a 52-year-old grandmother, turned into an activist when she watched her grandson, who was wading in a stream, scoop up a handful of fish killed by toxic coal slurry runoff. Bonds went on to form Coal River Mountain Watch.

This toxic runoff is generated by mountaintop removal mining to reach tiny capillaries of coal deep in the oldest mountains on Earth, the Appalachians. The process of mining the coal generates almost as much pollution as burning the coal. Forests are clear-cut; mountains are blasted open; and streams are clogged with toxic slurry. When you factor in the mining, there is no such thing as clean coal. It is time to make coal a thing of the past and embrace clean renewable energy, such as wind power, solar power, geothermal power and hydropower.

Here's what you can do to end the use of coal:

• Join Power Past Coal and organize or join an action in your community, at <http://www.PowerPastCoal.org>.

• Write letters to the editors of local newspapers encouraging people to think beyond coal and to support renewable energy projects in your community.

• Cut your electricity consumption, because most electric providers get half their power from coal that comes from mountaintop removal mines.

â€”Support renewable energy by purchasing wind energy through your utility company. In some areas, it only would cost \$7 more per 300 kilowatt hours to get all of your energy from wind instead of polluting sources. You can sign up by logging on to <http://www.NewWindEnergy.com> or by calling your utility company.

â€”Go solar, and feed your excess energy back into the national grid!

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