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Figures show W.Va. coal jobs up under Obama

By [Ken Ward Jr.](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- As West Virginia political leaders prepare for another round of attacks on the Obama administration's coal policies, state data show the number of mining jobs is at its highest level in nearly 20 years.

Figures from multiple government agencies reflect the job increases between 2009 and last year, offering a starkly different picture than is frequently portrayed by industry officials and coalfield political leaders.

"Any way you look at it, coal mining employment is at a two-decade high," said researcher Ted Boettner, who recently analyzed the figures for a blog published by his group, the West Virginia Center for Budget and Policy.

Last week, Boettner reported that West Virginia Workforce agency numbers showed nearly 22,700 mining jobs statewide in 2011, the most since 1995. If support industry jobs were added, the 2011 employment was 24,500, again the most since 1995.

Separate figures from the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training show 22,300 direct mining jobs statewide in 2011, a nearly 8 percent increase over employment during 2009, President Obama's first year in office. The mine safety office figures show last year's mining employment was the highest in the state since 1993.

Employment figures may drop off later this year, when recent layoffs by a number of companies, including Alpha Natural Resources and Patriot Coal, begin to show up in government statistics, analysts say. But companies announcing those layoffs have most frequently cited competition from low natural gas prices, a warm winter and the sluggish economy — not tougher environmental rules — as the central reasons for production cutbacks.

Late last week, for example, Alpha announced it was idling one surface mine and cutting production at another, putting 133 miners out of work.

"These two operations were caught in the downdraft of a declining coal market, just like a number of other Eastern coal producers that have announced recent production cuts and layoffs," said Alpha spokesman Ted Pile.

Previously, Alpha had cited "unusually mild winter weather and decade-low natural gas prices" when it announced a \$29 million first-quarter loss and revealed plans to idle 7 million tons of coal production.

Multiple government agencies keep track of coal employment numbers in different ways, and sometimes numbers from the various sources appear to contradict each other.

For example, average annual employment figures from the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration show a reduction in Appalachian coal jobs between 2009 and 2010.

Matt Wasson, who monitors coal data for the watchdog group Appalachian Voices, said the average annual figures don't provide as good of a glimpse at short-term trends -- such as employment changes over a president's term — as looking at quarterly numbers that provide more data points, and show the trend between 2009 and 2011 as one of rising coal employment.

"In reality, declining demand for coal is the bottleneck for production," Wasson told the House Natural Resources Committee during a hearing in March.

Next week, a state-funded group called the Coal Forum has planned a series of three events targeting what the industry calls Obama's "war on coal."

Meetings in Charleston, Wheeling and Beckley are meant to "increase awareness of the harmful impacts" of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency policies "and to discuss strategies for reversing them." Featured speakers include members of West Virginia's congressional delegation and United Mine Workers President Cecil Roberts.

The Coal Forum is an arm of the state Coal Mine Safety and Technical Review Committee, charged by state law with conducting "coal advocacy programs." Lawmakers have given the Coal Forum about \$60,000 in state money over the last two years.

West Virginia Coal Association vice president and lobbyist Chris Hamilton, who is co-chairman of the Coal Forum, said he wasn't aware that the number of mining jobs had increased in the state under the Obama administration.

"I did not note that increase when I looked at the numbers I was provided," Hamilton said Thursday. "The employment numbers are good. We're glad to provide gainful employment."

Hamilton noted that coal production in West Virginia and across the region is down so far in 2012, and said geological issues have reduced Appalachian coal's per-miner productivity, and likely played a role in the increased employment.

Since taking office, the Obama administration has sought to reduce the environmental impacts of mountaintop removal, and has expressed serious concerns about the growing body of evidence linking the practice to a variety of adverse health effects for nearby residents.

Obama's EPA also has issued the first-ever limits on toxic air emissions from coal-fired power plants, and proposed a rule that would set the first limits on greenhouse gas emissions from such plants.

Hamilton said if not for measures like these, West Virginia's coal jobs might have grown even more. But projections by government agencies and others suggest the industry is headed toward a long-term decline.

So far this year, coal production in West Virginia is down about 7 percent over the same period in 2011, according to the U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Information Administration.

Earlier this year, DOE projected that annual Central Appalachian coal production -- mostly consisting of Southern West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky -- is expected to drop to about 86 million tons, a decline of nearly 54 percent, between 2011 and 2035.

DOE cited slow growth in electricity demand, continued competition from natural gas and renewable energy, and the need to comply with new environmental regulations. The agency analysis, though, did not include any impacts from EPA's air-toxics rules or greenhouse gas limits, and DOE has said that the Obama crackdown on mountaintop removal is not a major factor in projections for future production declines.

Just last week, DOE projected that electrical generation nationwide from coal would decline by about 15 percent this year over 2011 generation. During the first quarter of 2012, coal's share of U.S. electricity generation dropped to 36 percent, far below the 50 percent still frequently cited by industry supporters.

Reach Ken Ward Jr. at kw...@wvgazette.com or 304-348-1702.

8 Comments

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Posted By: shogun09

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Goes to show most people have no idea what they're talking about when they bash Obama as a coal killer and hater of West Virginia. Most of these idiots are as mindless as the taliban who do as told because someone told them to. Wake up WV use your own mind and eyes to see the truth. If you wanna hate the man for other reasons well that's your choice but to hate him over lies and propaganda well that just stupid.

Posted at: May 17, 2012 9:56:07 pm

Posted By: appalachianintellectual

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put that in your coal-fired power plant and smoke it! time to take down the 'Obama's No-Jobs Zone' billboards around the valley...i don't want to hear another word about how President Obama wants to shut down all the mines...yet another falsehood disseminated by the right just like all the others.

Posted at: May 18, 2012 12:05:10 am

Posted By: Know

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Carl Rove and his propoganda has hit most West Virginian's very hard.

This is sad since we are some of the most vulnerable people in their playbook.

WE will overcome these creeps SOON!

Posted at: May 18, 2012 1:13:57 am

Posted By: Vito

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Figures show W.Va. coal jobs up under president Barack Obama, but yet the AFL-CIO , its president Richard Trumka TOTALLY supports Barack Obama in the next election for president. But also other organized labor unions such as the TEAMSTERS union endorses and supports Barack Obama !

I not only see that is a odd couple marriage between the unions and Barack Obama , but I find its so amusing that they would do that. Also many working union members will not be fooled by their union leaders to vote for Barack Obama.

Figures show W.Va. coal jobs up under Obama ???? Whats the AFL-CIO needs most is a house cleaning from the top to the bottom.

Posted at: May 18, 2012 4:37:23 am

Posted By: DJ77

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Here's the news Big Coal and their hack Joe Manchin didn't want voters to hear. Maybe the only thing down about coal is their influence upon the political and environmental landscape--hopefully.

Posted at: May 18, 2012 6:08:29 am