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Impact of 'War On Coal' Questioned - Mining Jobs Actually Up

May 21, 2012

CHARLESTON, W.Va. - The mining industry and most of the state's political leaders accuse the Environmental Protection Agency and the White House of waging a "war on coal." But according to Workforce West Virginia, the number of mining jobs is near a two-decade high.

Ted Boettner, executive director of the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, analyzed the employment numbers. He says the environmental policies actually have very little impact on the number of mining jobs here. He says that number is actually higher now than at any time since Bill Clinton's first term.

"Last year there were more people employed in the coal mining industry than at any time since 1995. In fact, since Obama took office we've seen an increase of 1500 people in the mining industry."

The industry has attacked the EPA for tightening rules on mountaintop removal and air pollution from coal-fired power plants. Boettner says those changes have far less impact than simple supply and demand.

Many of the state's mines produce high-quality metallurgical coal. Since "met" coal is used to make steel rather than burned for power, demand for it is largely unaffected by efforts to slow global climate change. And Boettner says the price is up around the world.

"We're exporting more and more of that coal. Metallurgical coal during its peak was well over \$200 a ton, whereas steam coal was \$60, \$75 a ton."

Over the long term, Boettner says, he expects less coal to be burned to produce electricity. But he says that has more to do with cheap natural gas than any federal policies.

"The fact of the matter is the EPA has very little impact on price and production. Meanwhile, what does have a big impact is discovering 180 trillion cubic feet of Marcellus gas."

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Boettner says another factor is thinner Appalachian coal seams. He says that means more miners are needed to get the same amount of coal.

More information is at tinyurl.com/d6ojrsy.

Dan Heyman, Public News Service - WV

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