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Still mining — Industry growth in W.Va. encouraging

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— Despite the Obama administration's foolish war on coal, new data is suggesting that coal mining employment in West Virginia has in fact reached its highest level since the 1990s. That is certainly encouraging news — particularly in light of the unrelenting attacks by the federal Environmental Protection Agency on the coalfields of southern West Virginia and Southwest Virginia.

A recent analysis of Workforce West Virginia figures by Ted Boettner with the West Virginia Center for Budget and Policy shows there were nearly 22,700 mining jobs in 2011, the Associated Press reported last week. That's the highest number of mining jobs in the Mountain State since 1995.

Data from the Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training concluded there were 22,300 mining jobs in 2011 — a slight variance from the Workforce West Virginia figure but still impressive.

“Any way you look at it, coal-mining employment is at a two-decade high,” Boettner was quoted as saying in the AP report.

However, the current mining boon may not last. The EPA continues to roll out new rules aimed at restricting coal mining, and the development of coal-powered facilities.

Just last week, the EPA announced its intent to appeal a federal court ruling that overturned its earlier veto of a key water pollution permit for one of West Virginia's largest mountaintop removal mines.

The federal court had ruled in March that the EPA exceeded its authority in January 2011 when it revoked a Clean Water Act permit that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer had issued for the project years earlier. But apparently a federal court ruling isn't enough to stop the EPA from pursuing its anti-coal agenda. And just two months ago, the EPA launched new rules that could effectively prevent new coal-fired power plants from being constructed. Those new rules could potentially derail plans for more than a dozen new coal-fired power plants in 10 different states, according to area lawmakers. That means new jobs that could have been created by the coal-fired plants will now be lost.

Further adding to the challenge ahead is predictions from the U.S. Department of Energy that coal production in Central Appalachia will decline nearly 54 percent, or about 86 million tons, between 2011 and 2035. Coal production in West Virginia so far this year is about 7 percent lower than during the same period in 2011.

Still, the recent statistics are encouraging. And we suspect they would in fact be a lot higher had it not been for the unrelenting efforts by the Obama administration to phase out coal in support of wind, solar and

other green energy sources, which at the moment, are not enough to replace the 45 percent of our nation's energy needs provided by coal.