



When the mining stops: What's a miner to do?

Posted: Sep 06, 2012 6:28 AM EDT

Updated: Sep 06, 2012 9:32 AM EDT

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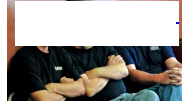
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This piece is part of a series on coal layoffs and its effects on West Virginia. Check out all of the stories by following these links:

[When the Mining Stops](#)

[Laid-off coal miners consider moving out](#)

[Coal miner maintain optimism, pride](#)



If you can call it celebrating, Chase Holcomb celebrated Labor Day as a newly laid-off miner.

When Holcomb, with a young wife and a baby on the way, learned in June he would be laid off Aug. 30 from the Fola mine in Clay County, he started thinking he just might move to Canada and mine coal there.

"You talk about going to another mine — that's just buying time," he said of his prospects in the state.

It's been a hard year to be a coal miner in West Virginia.

The state lost about 1,400 coal mining jobs in the first six months of the year, according to the Mine Safety and Health Administration, and the United Mine Workers puts layoffs in the past eight months at more than 2,500.

Holcomb, who ran a production excavator for Consol Energy at Fola, is one of 318 Fola miners who got Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification, or WARN, slips for the end of August.

More than 140 ended up laid off on Aug. 30, with 15 others transferred to other operations, according to Consol spokesperson Cathy St. Clair. That amounts to 5 percent of Clay County's work force.

Everyone in the coalfields knows how to weather cyclical layoffs. Holcomb, with just six years in mining, has already been laid off before, in 2010. That time, he found another mining job a lot farther away, and he returned when Consol called him back.

But this layoff, say some residents of Clay County, feels different.

"I think it's different because I think the biggest part of the nation is down on coal," said County Magistrate **Jeffery Boggs**.

"People here feel almost doomed by it because we feel like there's nobody fighting for us," said Amanda Moore, economic development coordinator for the Clay County Business Development Authority.

They blame increasing regulation. However, MSHA data show the state had more mining jobs coming into 2012, in spite of new environmental scrutiny, than at any time in the past decade.

Unfortunately, the challenges for coal are multiple and not so easily reversed.

In the short-term, coal demand has faced what the industry has dubbed a "perfect storm," a combination of a mild winter that ballooned coal stockpiles and natural gas that's hovering near a decade low price.

Medium-term, Environmental Protection Agency rules about mercury and greenhouse gas emissions probably will reduce the share of electricity that is produced from coal. While mercury rules could be overturned, many people inside the industry and outside believe greenhouse gas regulations are unavoidable.

A longer-term problem is that the easy-to-reach Central Appalachian coal has been mined out.

The allure of the mines

Charlie Mitchell, a home consultant with Clayton Homes near Madison, was the first Mitchell in his family to not go into mining. He said it was because his father, a miner, advised him against it.

"If you can get your education, go do something different," Mitchell said, recalling his father's advice. "You'll do great for five, six or seven years, and then it will be awful for three or four years where you're laid off and worried about your job. This has been going on for ages."

Because there is little other opportunity to earn a high salary, Mitchell said much the population's pool of talent leaves to go elsewhere.

"I think a big misconception about this area is that we are a bunch of dumb hillbillies that don't know anything else," Mitchell said. "There's a lot of very smart, talented people that work in the mines. They could've just as easily gone off to college and gone into business or another field, but chose their field. It's not because they aren't smart or they aren't talented."

Why do they go to the mines? Because, Mitchell said, the salaries are too high for many to turn down.

"The allure of the mines, as a young person, is that a 20-year-old without a college education, but is good mechanically, or electrically or is trainable, can go get an \$80,000- or \$90,000-a-year job versus going to college, racking up thousands of dollars in debt and getting a \$30,000-a-year job," Mitchell said.

Those starting salaries are more than twice the state average. And associated with those higher wages is a premium benefit package. A 2006 survey by Workforce West Virginia found workers in natural resources and mining were more likely to have retirement plans, medical insurance and sick leave.

Natural gas could provide an alternative good-paying job, but the booming shale gas activity is too far away to commute. Also, the Clay County coal mining families that spoke with The State Journal said it doesn't pay as well as coal — \$15 per hour as opposed to the \$30 they've been making — and they see it as a little cliquey, hard for a miner to get into.

A good job, Mitchell said, is necessary to fulfill a big cultural tradition of the region.

"We're family-oriented and we desire to take care of our family, giving them a nice home, a nice vehicle and all the opportunities they can give," Mitchell said. "It's why we do the things we do."

Retraining

Help is coming for laid-off miners in the form of a \$1.8 million federal Department of Labor grant that the United Mine Workers of America and WorkForce West Virginia partnered to win.

"The grant will provide up to \$5,000 a year for classroom or occupational skills in demand occupations," said WorkForce acting Executive Director Russell Fry.

Many of the training programs take a year or less to complete, and any miner laid off starting March 1 who received a WARN notice is eligible, as are affected homemakers.

"We started actively recruiting two weeks ago," said UMWA Career Center Director Brett Dillon. "Probably half a dozen clients or more have decided what they want to do."

Participants have chosen training in welding, CDL truck driving and licensed professional nursing, Dillon said.

Are there jobs for them? Fry said there are, and he pointed to the 2,200 or so listings on WorkForce's website in early September.

Many of the jobs pay at or near minimum wage, but many others pay in the teens and above. For example, a maintenance technician in Caldwell earns \$21 an hour, and a diesel mechanic in Grafton makes \$24 an hour.

Miners, unfortunately, don't always hear about the services available to them.

Mitchell McCoy, laid off from Arch Coal's Eastern Complex in Webster County, said, "I think usually they sign you up and they'll let you try to find your own job for a while, and later they'll suggest that you need to maybe change what you were doing and then they offer you stuff. I'm not even sure they do that anymore."

The WorkForce office in Webster County has been cut to 16 hours per week and the two-days-per-month position in Clay County is currently unfilled.

And things fall through the cracks. A miscommunication between WorkForce and Fola, it seems, has resulted in failure to schedule a Rapid Response meeting to inform those workers of their opportunities.

But beyond all that, it simply is hard for a high school graduate to replace a salary of \$90,000. Asked how a family can find similar income, Fry referred to the displaced homemaker support in the grant.

"If the other person had to get into the labor market (too), this would be a way to pay for training," he said.

"Families suffer," Dillon said. "They've got to learn to live on less income. But they're better taken care of now than they would have been. It's not going to be a silver platter but they are going to get some help."

Because of the date and WARN notice restrictions, only about 900 of an estimated 2,500 laid off since late December are eligible, Dillon said, but the union is seeking ways to help the other miners too.

'Cushion the impact'

The West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, an independent nonprofit think tank, says the state should prioritize the creation of a task force to take on the challenges the coalfields communities are certain to face.

"While no one knows whether projections for coal's steep decline will occur as predicted, the prudent course would be for state officials to convene a taskforce composed of economic development officials

as well as representatives from business, labor, educational institutions, religious organizations and the affected communities to look for ways to ease the possible impact and search for viable economic alternatives," the report states.

Executive Director Ted Boettner said he's not sure what may happen to communities that have sprung up from the coal mines. Any solution to the symptoms of a resource-based monoconomy, he said, will likely be multi-pronged in its approach.

"There's just a structural decline southern West Virginia and Appalachia," Boettner said. "You're not going to reverse it. The productivity has just dropped so much. ... How we're going to help workers transition is a big question that we have, and we're simply not facing it."

Boettner said if the state acts soon it "could cushion the impact. "We can start having a frank conversation because if we don't things are going to start getting a whole lot worse," Boettner said.

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