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West Virginia miners: 'We want to not be forgotten'

Coal workers angry about policies on livelihood



A coal miner cheers Mitt Romney, a few weeks before he officially became the GOP presidential nominee, at a campaign stop in Beallsville, Ohio. The miners fear what Obama administration policies will do to their livelihoods as well as their families' way of life in Appalachia.

(Associated Press)

By [Andrea Billups](#) - The Washington Times

Tuesday, September 18, 2012

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — Bobby Brock is keeping the promise he made to his family never to work in a coal mine. Many of his kinfolk have eked out a dangerous but steady living a mile underground in the darkness and chill, and Mr. Brock, who lost his uncle in the 2010 Upper Big Branch mine disaster, proudly defends their honor.

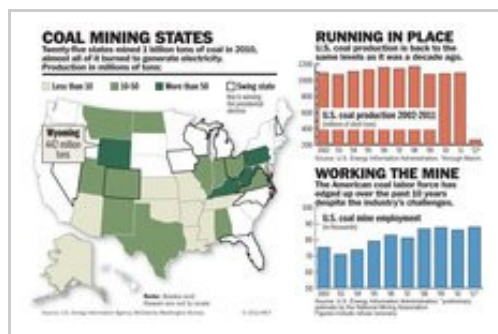
"Every time you flip a light switch, thank a miner," he says.

Mr. Brock, 48, who lives in Beckley, W.Va., in the heart of the state's southern coalfields, is like many others here — angry at what he sees as a government in Washington determined to take away not only his livelihood but erode, with regulations and greed, a hardscrabble culture that has held families and mountain communities together for decades.

"Miners spend every day 6 inches from hell, and they do it for the love of their family and making a better way for them. Ain't that part of the American dream? Not if Obama has anything to do with it," Mr. Brock argues. "I do not respect him or his party for what they are doing to this state."

Others who monitor policy and state politics are reluctant to lay all the industry's woes at the feet of the president, although it is clear President Obama's energy policies have not helped him with Mountain State voters. Increasing environmental regulations and the call for "clean coal" — a part of the Democratic platform at this month's party

convention in Charlotte, N.C. — have made this unfriendly electoral territory for Mr. Obama.



The problems, which are presenting a target of opportunity for Republican challenger Mitt Romney in swing states such as Ohio and Virginia, were underscored again Tuesday with the announcement by Virginia-based Alpha Natural Resources that it was cutting production by 16 million tons, eliminating 1,200 jobs and immediately shutting down eight mines in West Virginia, Virginia and Pennsylvania.

Saying the moves reflect in part the difficult economy and in part a shift by customers to cheaper natural gas, Alpha CEO Kevin Crutchfield said in a statement, “The elimination of jobs on this scale is something I take very seriously. Unfortunately, we think we have to do it to set the company on the right foot going forward.”

As the Alpha cutbacks show, coal’s competitiveness has waned as natural gas prices have fallen and export demand drops as China’s economy cools. And the tumble for coal that is not projected to stop, according to an economic report released in September by the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy. The report suggests that coal jobs are up for now, according to Executive Director Ted Boettner, but the long-term projections are not good.

“Coal employment actually increased over the last decade, although there are signs of a downturn at present that is likely to continue,” the report concluded.

Said Mr. Boettner: “The jobs are a function of declines in productivity. There’s been a sharp decline in productivity in the last decade and it is expected to further decline into 2035. We think there will be a decline in about 1,200 jobs in 2012. But there are more coal miners employed now than before Obama took office.”

Local problem

Despite its critical role in the economy here, coal is not the single issue driving the election in 2012, even as biting billboards all along state highways remind visitors that the industry is still king. Mr. Obama lost the state in 2008 and is given little chance again in 2012, even though pro-coal Democrats still do well at the state and local level.

“There are a lot of people in West Virginia who oppose the administration’s energy policy. I think it is not terribly popular in West Virginia on average,” said West Virginia University political scientist Neil Berch. “That is speaking to the state as being not in play in the presidential race, and is leading to interesting situation where conservative Democrats running for re-election for both senator and governor are distancing themselves somewhat from the president.”

Key members of the state Democratic establishment did not attend the Charlotte convention, including Sen. Joe Manchin III, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin and longtime Rep. Nick J. Rahall II. West Virginia voters dealt Mr. Obama the most embarrassing day of the 2012 cycle so far, when felon Keith Judd, incarcerated in Texas, won 40.7 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary.

Mr. Obama’s coal conundrum isn’t limited to West Virginia — Ohio and Virginia, two states Mr. Obama won in 2008 and would dearly like to hold this year, also have major coal-producing regions and similar complaints about the administration’s regulatory and energy policies regarding coal.

West Virginia, though, is pretty much a lost cause for the president, even if ticket-splitting is likely to be the order of the day Nov. 6.

"Romney is going to win here," Mr. Berch said. "The two conservative Democrats are going to win the Senate and governor's races. Voters are making a pretty big distinction between national Democrats and state Democrats."

Coal's clout

How big a role energy policy will impact this election cycle is uncertain. In 2010, voters in coal-producing states such as Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio ousted incumbent members of Congress in favor of Republicans, offering a reminder that the industry still matters in targeted areas.

Ken Green, an energy policy analyst at the Washington-based American Enterprise Institute, said coal and fossil fuels are regional issues. But they still can have an outsized impact when the industry views its vital issues as threatened. He noted it was coal-state Democrats, not Republicans, who torpedoed Mr. Obama's "cap-and-trade" plan to limit carbon emissions in his first term. Mr. Obama and national Democrats also have said relatively little on issues such as climate change, in part because of the political costs in energy-producing states.

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Andrea Billups

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[ohmama](#) • 4 hours ago

Barack Obama vowed to kill the coal industry in 2008. Why any miner would vote for Barack Obama is beyond me.

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[Bach](#) • 11 hours ago

If you don't get out and vote for Romney this November, your life will be controlled by New York liberals and Hollywood actors who wouldn't know anthracite from bituminous.

9 ^ ▮ 2 ▾ • Reply • Share ›



[wrongheifer](#) • 14 hours ago

The Sierra Club has filed a lawsuit in my town...They want to shut down two of our coal fired power plants saying they're "24 years in arrears on updates and out of compliance"...So, what are we going to do for power then?...Piss on Obama! Vote Romney!

9 ^ ▮ 1 ▾ • Reply • Share ›



[sonny davis](#) • 3 hours ago • parent

Coal miners in every coal mining area must vote Republican to send a message to

liberal socialist Democrats in DC or their industry will be shut down entirely. Wake up you coal miners. You will get the royal screwing if Obama wins.

3 ^ | 2 v • Reply • Share ›



Erc Seitz • 13 hours ago

Sorry people, you voted for a guy and a party that hates coal.

9 ^ | 2 v • Reply • Share ›



Independence2012 • 11 hours ago

These ticket-splitters in the Coal states are undermining their own efforts to protect their livelihoods. The President is not a king ---- he cannot make laws on his own (notwithstanding Obama's pretensions otherwise).

Voting for Romney, and then voting for liberal senators and congressmen who will fight every effort of his to restrain the EPA to the rule of law, and to protect the coal and other domestic energy industries --- is really still just a vote to destroy the coal industry, just at a slower rate than if they'd voted for Obama.

To undo the damage that Obama has done to the coal industry and domestic energy production, Romney would need as much support from Congress as possible. Without that, these coal miners are going to find that Obama's policies will remain in place, grinding on autonomously because the new Administration will have its hands tied ironically by the very same Democrat legislators that the Coal States' miners sent to Congress --- a case of a state's voters unwittingly voting for a gridlock that will destroy their way of life.

6 ^ | 1 v • Reply • Share ›



rodney007 • 2 hours ago

Hard working miners who perform dangerous and tough work need to stand up and vote Obama out. He has no compassion or understanding of the energy engine of America and no coherent energy policy with any pragmatic solutions. We are a coal rich energy and oil resources Nation. The US can extricate itself from the brigands in OPEC and use our own energy for powering our economic engine instead of building hotels and giving diamond studded autos to Arab magnates. Our wealth is flowing out of the country with the price of oil to other unappreciative and increasingly hostile forces. Why are we so stupid?

2 ^ | 1 v • Reply • Share ›



kenpuck • 12 hours ago

Fellas, the solution is as close as your polling station: Vote Romney and kick "green energy" back into the stone age.

7 ^ | 2 v • Reply • Share ›



john whitehurst • 6 hours ago • parent

If it were that simple.

Romney win means nothing without a House and senate majority with no filibuster.

You folks in Coal country get rid of the sitting Democrats you have and put in Republicans

red folks in coal country get rid of the sitting Democrats you have and put in Republicans ones who will support your jobs..

Voting Romney then democrat liberal, progresive for house and senate will kill you slower but nevertheless kill your jobs..

4 ^ | 2 v • Reply • Share ›



sonny davis • 3 hours ago

How to keep West Virginia from being totally a forgotten state? Vote straight Republican.

Free Enterprise wont micromanage your coal industry like Obama is doing. While you are at it that Republican vote will rid us of your worthless Senator who is a lap dog for Obama.

3 ^ | 2 v • Reply • Share ›



raptor45 • 25 minutes ago

Andrea...do you think you could have printed a clumsier quote? "We want to not...."

0 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



tma_sierrahills • an hour ago

Coal miners are pretty much heroes in what they do for America, but one regulation that should be strengthened is the banning of mountaintop mining. It is sort as if our government were allowing oil companies to better get at offshore oil by evaporating the level of the sea with small atomic weapons. Many small towns, many of them with considerable numbers of retired miners, are being hurt by this practice.

0 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



thunderclapnewman • an hour ago

Hey. WV coal miners. Just like the miners in PA, you want to keep your job but are belolden to the unions, and you seem physically incapable of voting for anyone but a Democrat. I like coal. I'm from PA. However, you're losing me with your unbelievably weird tradition of voting rather than voting for the issues.

0 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Buypass • 2 hours ago

WV is still full of blindly faithful Democrats. For people who Obie hates for clinging to "their bibles and guns" as he and his party are destroying their coal industry jobs and economy I have one question. Are you guys crazy?

1 ^ | 1 v • Reply • Share ›



HollyRae101 • 9 hours ago

I'm voting 'Democrat' because after Obama & the Democrats destroy the coal/electricity industries, thousands of 'soon-to-be' unemployed miners really do want to stand in Obama unemployment lines for Obama handouts and then, go home and freeze their asses off because Obama's EPA won't allow them to turn up their damm thermostats!

1 ^ | 2 v • Reply • Share ›



raytrebor • 9 hours ago

Coal miners, Obama has not forgotten you:

"Obama has historically been a proponent of the coal industry, and is a staunch supporter of "clean coal" technologies.

In 1997, he voted to use sales taxes to help reopen closed coal mines and create "incentives to attract new businesses that use coal."

In 2001, he voted for legislation that provided \$3.5 billion in loan guarantees to construct coal-fired power plants with no means of controlling carbon emissions. Before voting for the bill, Obama said, "I am a strong supporter, I think, of downstate coal interests and our need to prop up and improve the outputs downstate."

In 2003, Obama voted to allow \$300 million in bonds for the construction and expansion of coal plants. When he ran for U.S. Senate in 2004, he announced that "there's always going to be a role for coal" in Illinois.

On January 4, 2007, Obama helped introduce the Coal-to-Liquids Fuel Promotion Act of 2007. The bill was intended to help grow the coal-to-liquids industry through tax incentives and public-private partnerships. However, while the bill may have appealed to the coal industry in his home state of Illinois, he was strongly criticized by environmentalists.[4] Obama then qualified his position by saying he would only support liquefied coal if it emitted 20 percent less carbon over its lifecycle than conventional fuels.

On June 19, 2007, Obama voted in favor of an amendment to establish a loan program for projects to produce syngas from coal and other feedstocks, while working to lower greenhouse gas emissions. The amendment did not pass.

On October 8, 2007, Obama reaffirmed his support for "clean coal" technology but stated his support for "a ban on new traditional coal facilities":

Source: Sourcewatch.

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