

Study: Reduce KY coal dependency for better health

DYLAN LOVAN - Associated Press - Associated Press

The mining, burning and disposing of coal is sickening Kentuckians and lawmakers aren't doing enough to reduce the state's dependency on its primary energy source, according to an environmental group's new report.

The Kentucky Environmental Foundation's report, "Health Impacts of Coal and Clean Energy Options in Kentucky," says Kentucky should generate a larger share of its electricity from alternative sources such as solar, wind and hydroelectric power to mitigate the negative health effects. The group said it will send the report to every state legislator.

"Coal as we know takes a toll on the health of Kentuckians; it's a fact that many health professionals and researchers know well," said Elizabeth Crowe, executive director of the environmental group based in Berea. "Unfortunately many of Kentucky's elected officials seem concerned about protecting the image and profits of the coal industry, with little if any time donated to consideration of the impact on public health."

About 92 percent of Kentucky's electric power comes from coal-fired power plants, and the state enjoys some of the lowest electric rates in the nation, according to the Kentucky Coal Association, which promotes the industry.

Rep. Keith Hall, a Democrat from Pikeville who owns coal reserves in eastern Kentucky, said coal is burned cleaner than ever before and that Kentucky's low electric rates give it an advantage in attracting new business.

"But there is a great need to grasp every alternative source" of energy, said Hall, vice chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources and the Environment. "The hard thing to do is how do we incorporate a transition and be cost-effective to every ratepayer in Kentucky. We need to be careful not to mandate a rate increase that would destroy the competitive advantage the state has."

The report argues that coal extraction at surface and underground mines, washing, transportation, burning and disposing of coal waste can contribute to numerous health problems, such as respiratory and nervous system complications from breathing polluted air and consuming water tainted with mercury and other toxic metals.

Kentucky Coal Association President Bill Bissett said environmental activists are attempting to sway public opinion on coal with "biased reports" at a time when Americans are living longer than ever before.

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"The truth is their scare tactics will cause Kentucky's electricity rates to skyrocket with little to no actual improvement in the air we breathe," Bissett said in a statement.

Rep. Mary Lou Marzian, a Louisville Democrat, said she understands that Kentucky "is a coal state," and that many state lawmakers may be reluctant to support policies that seek to move away from coal production.

Marzian has sponsored a bill, HB 167, that would require utilities to generate a portion of their power from renewable sources. She said Wednesday the bill is in an early educational phase and she didn't expect it to pass during this year's session.

"I've learned that sometimes things take a while," Marzian said. "I think we need to work with our coal (legislators) and give them reassurance that looking at renewables can work and be synergistic with the coal industry."

A copy of the report is available at the environmental group's website, <http://kyenvironmentalfoundation.org> .

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