

Wyoming looks to keep coal in energy mix

By The Associated Press

WRIGHT - If the mines near Wright shut down, Mayor Ralph Kingan says the town would "probably become almost nonexistent."

This town of 2,200 owes its very existence to coal. Atlantic Richfield Co. established Wright shortly after the company began digging coal some 35 years ago in the barren hills nearby. Since then, many Wright residents have become linked in some way to the area's coal industry, which includes two of North America's largest producing mines.

But coal from the mines are shipped to plants that emit huge amounts of carbon dioxide. And those plants face tough regulations in federal legislation approved by the House Friday and awaiting a vote and debate in the Senate.

That's cause for concern among state and local leaders. It's become clear in Wyoming - the top coal producing state - that the state's economy depends heavily on finding a cleaner way to convert coal into electricity.

We have enough coal to last us 500 years if they just find a way to..." Kingan said, pausing without finishing his thought. "There's got to be a way I'm sure."

Dozens of research efforts across the country are under way to find methods of capturing carbon dioxide produced from burning coal and storing it underground in order to keep the greenhouse gas out of the atmosphere.

The Obama administration recently revived a plan to contribute \$1 billion toward building a futuristic coal-burning power plant in Illinois that will test carbon capture and sequestration.

While "clean coal" technology is still in its infancy, Wyoming isn't waiting around.

The state is undertaking an expensive and time-consuming effort to help keep coal in the nation's future energy picture.

It's taken the lead in crafting laws regulating carbon capture and storage projects, and contributed \$50 million in a venture with General Electric Co. to build a \$100 million plant to research turning Wyoming coal into cleaner burning natural gas.

It's also creating a new School of Energy Resources at the University of Wyoming to research clean coal technology.

The coal industry generates just over \$1 billion a year in tax revenue for state and local governments. It also directly employs some 6,600 workers who earn about \$600 million a year combined. Another 18,000 Wyoming jobs are indirectly created by coal mining.

The state still has plenty of coal in the ground to last generations: 1.4 trillion tons, with 45 billion tons that can be mined economically under today's technology.

"For a state like Wyoming, it's not a choice of coal or not coal. It's: 'Is it going to do its part to help solve global warming, or is it going to try to push coal out of the state to states that are increasingly unwilling to accept its product?' " said Bruce Nilles, director of the Sierra Club's "Beyond Coal"

campaign.

Advocates for coal say the resource should be a part of future electric generation because it will take decades to establish renewables as a viable energy source. They say the technology doesn't exist yet to store large quantities of renewable power. Wind turbines don't produce power when the wind doesn't blow, for example.

"Nobody who realistically looks at the numbers, either in Wyoming or in the United States or in the world, can end up saying somehow you're going to fuel both the American and world energy economy without coal," said Gov. Dave Freudenthal, a Democrat.

He argues that not only his state, but the entire nation, has a stake in coal's future if the United States wants to maintain affordable electric bills and meet the nation's future power demands.

"They always say, 'Well, this is a problem for the coal states,' " Freudenthal said. "But it's a problem for the whole country if you think about the fact that half the electric power comes from coal."

Worldwide energy demand could triple in the next 40 years or so, said Steven F. Leer, chief executive officer of St. Louis-based Arch Coal Inc., which employs about 1,200 workers at several Wyoming coal mines.

"If you look at the global use of energy and the demands that are projected for the use of energy, fossil fuels are going to be the heavy lifter for the next decade and the next decade after that and probably through 2050," Leer said.

Arch Coal recently donated \$1.5 million to the University of Wyoming for researching ways that Wyoming coal can be used more cleanly. The state matched the gift dollar for dollar.

Freudenthal said the industry will have to adapt like it did in 1990 when coal-fired plants were required to make drastic reductions in sulfur dioxide emissions.

"We have to end up with a policy on carbon just as we did on SO₂," he said. "Just, it's harder to answer the questions."

With news of some coal mines in the eastern U.S. closing down and laying off workers, the answers can't come soon enough for Wright's mayor, who still recalls what happened in 1984 when gas and oil prices fell dramatically.

"We lost half the population of the town, lost a thousand people overnight almost," Kingan said. "It was about the same size as we are right now: 2,200."

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