

The Coal Industry's Unabated War on Americans' Health

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Progressive Radio Network, December 7, 2009

Eight AM on a Saturday morning, fresh snow has been falling for two hours. My daughter Shelly asked if we could make snow ice cream. I said sure. We got a large bowl and went outside. As I scooped the snow to fill the bowl, it was covered with red, black and brown specks as if someone had shaken a container of seasoning much as one would over mash potatoes. So I scratched away an inch and below was more particulate matter. In fact, as I looked around, all of the snow was polluted. What was remarkable was that this was not considered unusual.

This was in West Virginia, yet it was a phenomena occurring across many regions of the nation. It was common to speak to people in and around those communities who had black lung, emphysema and other pulmonary and cardiac conditions. Nobody questioned this. You simply accepted that the cost of living and working in such an environment was to live in the constant presence of illness, disease and premature death.

Today, everyone waking up in southern California begins their mornings breathing tiny unseen particulate matter and toxic gases. Much of this comes from the coal-fired plants in China. Whether you live in Appalachia, the Pacific coast, across the industrial Midwest, just about anywhere in America, you exist in stew of pollution, 24-7, with heavy metals, greenhouse gases, and dozens of particulate matter, that come directly from the coal industry. And yet President Obama has made a policy effort to have us believe that taxpayers should give the coal companies billions of dollars to create clean coal. Sorry Mr. President. You are lying. You, the lobbyists, the corporate funded think tanks, the fossil fuel moguls, are all engaged in trying to convince Americans that clean coal is the best solution to reduce the environmental threats of climate change. It is not going to happen. It cannot happen, because everything about this story is utterly false. Increasingly Americans are becoming aware that every agency in our government is a wholly-owned subsidiary of some special corporate interest. And these agencies are nothing more than the policy propagandists for these same industries who continue with business as usual with very little

oversight and regulation, no reform, no transparency and no fundamental change that will promise Americans that they will have better and more healthy lives in the future.

As the global warmists debate the coolists over how much humanity is contributing to climate change, one thing is certain: the number one source for greenhouse gas emissions, the coal industry, is waging an unprecedented war on the health of Americans. This is a fact skeptics of any political color or atmospheric persuasion cannot deny. What the protests for the UN climate change summit in Copenhagen, Coal River Mountain in West Virginia, and across many world cities lack are the stories of personal loss, family collapse into healthcare debt, disease and death that result from coal-to-energy processing. These stories will continue to mount if the coal industry and its Washington lobbyists, such as the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity—a network of the largest coal companies who contributed \$47 million last year to lobby the Beltway—remain the ghostwriters of the nation's energy bills.

For many people whose livelihoods and residences have yet to experience early adverse effects of global warming, climate change remains an abstract theory, an unpredictable event projected into a distant future. However, as the release of greenhouse gases and toxins from fossil fuel energy translates into rising health crises—because many boomers will be spending much of their retirement years in dementia or witness their pensions going towards heart-bypasses, surgeries and astronomically expensive anti-cancer drugs—then a more effective outrage can be spearheaded against the coal industry and its political supporters. These hooligans, the private corporate authors of endgame scenarios, should equally be charged with inflicting illness and death upon numerous children and the elderly. They can equally be charged with further exacerbating the immune systems of millions of people whose bodies are already immuno-compromised. Right now green environmentalism needs to get on the health bandwagon. For example, the December 7 issue of *The Nation* was devoted to climate change, but no article dealt specifically with the serious threats to health associated with the energies most responsible for greenhouse gases and toxins in the atmosphere. This comes at a time when life expectancy in America is ranked 34th globally and continues on a slow downward trend.

While major energy bills await deliberation and approval in the House and Senate, President Obama has craftily sealed America's fate to aggressive clean coal policies with China's

President Hu Jintao. The White House's November 17 press release announced the world's two largest emitters of greenhouse gases will cooperate in a "Twenty-First Century Coal" initiative to develop large-scale carbon capture and storage sequestration (CCS). Among the major collaborators in the US-China agreement is Peabody Energy, the world's largest private sector coal company posting \$6.6 billion in revenues last year. With the Congressional climate bill seeking a measly 4 percent below 1990 levels in greenhouse gases during the next ten years, far less than the 40 percent reduction international scientists say is required to offset global warming, the President has effectively assured the US will remain in the coal age for many years to come and retain its award as the world's largest per capita emitter of CO₂ and greenhouse gases.

However, the urgency for more dramatic reductions in greenhouse gases and stricter regulations on the coal industry has yet to sink into the frontal lobes of the Obama administration and coal's henchmen in Congress. The Waxman-Markey coal-friendly American Clean Energy and Security Act in the House is a vagrant insult on human intelligence. The bill promotes nothing as its title suggests. It would potentially raise homeowner energy costs as high as ninety percent. The bill's many loopholes are free gifts to the coal companies to assure their receipt of billions of dollars in subsidies and a free pass to continue their assault on Americans' health. Worse, the billions being targeted for clean coal only apply to research and development until 2025. This is because the entire idea of clean coal is still an imaginary chimera, a ruse for the coal companies to continue their filthy business unabated until some future time when clean coal might turn into a reality.

Following the heels of the Obama-China announcements, an alarming health report released by the Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), "Coal's Assault on Human Health," sends a strong message to coal addicts in the White House and Congress. Indirectly, the report charges the coal companies, their legislative supporters, and the White House with complicity in sustaining a pollution-ridden technology now wreaking havoc on the population's physical health leading to pre-mature death rates across the nation.

According to the PSR study, coal is a leading contributor to four of the top five causes of death in the US: heart disease, cancer, stroke and chronic lower respiratory diseases. Recent statistics from the American Heart Association report that one in three Americans now has a

form of cardiovascular disease. Coal processing is also a major contributor to the nation's epidemic of neurodegenerative conditions in children and adults, such as compromised intellectual capacities and even Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases in the elderly. One of coal manufacturing's more serious byproducts is particulate matter (PM). PM_{2.5} in particular has been associated with brain inflammation resulting in amyloid deposits that are a common biomarker for diagnosing Alzheimer's.

Neurodegenerative conditions are now increasing faster than surveys can accurately keep pace. Coal's byproducts, including mercury, hinder the brain's neurological health since they interfere with unhindered capillary blood flow through the brain. Last October, Harvard University released its National Children's Survey Report noting that autism spectrum disorder (ASD) rates have jumped to 1 in 91 children, a dramatic increase in ASD from the previous 1 in 150 rate. Coal combustion produces 30 percent of the mercury spewed into our environment and there are approximately 600,000 children with toxic levels of mercury in their systems. Genetics, the lifeline of deniers of ASD's external and environmental causes, simply cannot account for this epidemic when the huge toxic offensive on children due to coal firing, industrial food and vaccines are added into the equation. Genetics is an evolutionary development. A sixty percent increase in the ASD rate over several years cannot be accounted for by genetics alone. However few are raising an alarm that the coal industry is responsible for 98 percent of all utility-related mercury pollution being churned out across the country.

For the majority of Americans, the images of black lung and coal-related pulmonary and cardiovascular illnesses fall under the illusion that these conditions are limited to coal miners, towns and communities near mines and combustion plants. The PSR report however investigates every stage of the mining-to-energy conversion process: blasting, mining, rail and road transportation, washing and the generation of slurry, coal-firing, and disposal of post-combustion toxic waste. Far from being a localized health risk, coal's toxic pollutants inflict enormous biomolecular damage upon the population's health at every level of coal processing. There are now 584 coal ash dumps and over 600 coal firing plants scattered across vast tracts of land, towns and cities. For example, the transportation of coal alone releases over 600 thousand tons of nitrogen oxide and 50 thousand tons of particulate matter into America's air annually. Together these two toxins contribute to asthmatic illness, chronic

obstructive pulmonary disease, stunted lung development in children, rising infant mortality, lung cancer, myocardial infarction, congestive heart failure, ischemic stroke and brain development delays. With a lame short-sighted healthcare bill before the Senate, and no fundamental efforts being made to wean the country off coal-based energy, the country is poised for a health catastrophe beyond imagination during the years ahead.

Besides the several dozen toxic particulate matter (PM)--extremely fine particles capable of penetrating gas exchange regions of the body to produce inflammation in other organs—numerous coal-processing pollutants fill our bodies with oxidizing chemicals, such as sulfide minerals, arsenic, barium, lead, aluminum, cadmium, carcinogenic dioxins and formaldehyde, nickel and mercury. A study cited from the *New England Medical Journal* in the PSR report found that in 51 metropolitan areas where coal-related PM concentrations were reduced due to the Clean Coal Act, life expectancy increased. Another study found hospital admissions for cerebrovascular disease and ischemic stroke are directly related to coal-related toxicity.

There is also growing evidence that coal processing emissions are contributing to the alarming rise in diabetes. Diabetes rates have nearly doubled over the past ten years, now affecting nine in one hundred citizens. Forty-five percent of new cases are children and for the first time we are witnessing a steady growth in adult Type 2 diabetes in kids. A leading culprit is one of coal's most dangerous pollutants, the inflammatory molecule nitrogen oxide that has been shown to trigger insulin resistance, a defining characteristic of Type 2 diabetes.

The PSR study predicts the future increase in the degradation of Americans' health if the government remains addicted to the coal age. Al Gore has compared the nonsensical theory of clean coal with "healthy cigarettes," and Greenpeace has summarized it as nothing more than a "public relations fabrication" concocted by the coal industry." During a New York broadcast on NPR and the Progressive Radio Network immediately following the PSR study release at the National Press Club, Evan Kanter, MD, President of PSR and a clinical professor of neuroscience at the University of Washington Medical School, categorically called clean coal a "dirty lie." It is a word play that best translates into further environmental deregulation and billions of dollars going to the coal industry.

But as the Obama Administration hangs inept in the coal industry's gallows, it is Congress that is most devilish. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued an endangerment report confirming greenhouse gases assault on public health. In doing so, greenhouse gases can be regulated under the Clean Air Act, much to the displeasure of the coal and nuclear industries. Residents of Wyoming should be especially thrilled since the Wyoming State Geological Survey group is also a collaborator in the US-China clean coal experiment. Very likely that state will be home for hundreds of thousands of giga-tons of underground CO₂ storage awaiting leaks to asphyxiate people and increase the acidity of the state's water resources. Yet Congress, having been purchased by the energy complex, now seeks to strip away the EPA's regulatory authority on this matter.

Dr. Evans explained the clean coal myth as referring "to the technique of carbon capture and sequestration (CCS). The problem with carbon capture and sequestration is that it doesn't exist. It is ten to twenty years in the future. There is no demonstrated ability to do this now, and it would not help at all with any mitigation of global warming at this time." Moreover, clean coal technology will still require mountain blasting, mining, washing, transportation and the release of most of the coal industry's worse pollutants. Mercury, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, surface ozone and dozens of particulate matters will remain in the atmosphere and water sources.

"It is a real pie in the sky notion," states Dr. Evans, "It is by no way shape or form anywhere clean and it is just a way for the coal industry to get billions of dollars from this developing legislation. So nobody should be fooled as there being any such thing as clean coal." Holly Spaulding's article, "Searching for CCS" in *The Nation* lists the serious downside of an energy program dumping billions of dollars into an uncertain and speculative clean coal campaign. On the one hand it is "fabulously expensive." In one instance, the current plans to resurrect the defunct FutureGen project from the Bush years could cost \$10,000 to power a single home. Clean coal also requires vast amounts of additional energy to make carbon capture technology succeed. For now clean coal is a ridiculously expensive political pipedream to sustain the livelihoods of coal executives.

The report's conclusions are in direct contrast to what can be distilled from Obama's energy agenda and the Waxman-Markey bill. This includes immediate measures undertaken to move

the nation away from its coal reliance and to further solidify the EPA's mandate to regulate CO₂ emissions under the Clean Air Act. A truly comprehensive energy plan for the 21st century would put a halt to the construction of new coal-fired plants and enforce stricter regulations on many of the pollutant emissions from electrical generation. However at present, the Administration and Congress remain in denial over the human cost in disease and death that will increase if they push forward their current energy policies. Their loyalties don't favor the improvement of Americans' health but have been sold to the coal terrorists intent on further reducing Americans' life expectancy.

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