

Anti-coal Activist Uses Deceptive Arguments

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Vernon Haltom, co-director of the Coal River Mountain Watch, an anti-mining activist group, in his Nov. 21 letter to the editor, accused me of twisting the facts regarding the economic impact of coal mining in West Virginia. His letter was in response to a commentary in which I stated that the coal industry does not have to twist the facts to prove its vitality and importance to West Virginia and the nation.

His attack against the coal industry was scattershot, but it is important for West Virginians to understand the facts so that important policy decisions are not based on the deceptive arguments of a vocal group of anti-mining "againsters."

In his attempt to minimize the importance of surface mining and to call for its abolition, Haltom says West Virginia employs only "6,000 surface miners, making up less than one percent of the work force."

Apparently eliminating at least 6,000 well-paying mining jobs -- as well as 30,000 additional jobs in support of surface mining -- does not concern the Coal River Mountain Watch. I don't know if those workers would find Haltom's plan for them to their liking. Moreover, mining is concentrated in certain regions of the state, and the anti-mining extremists' success in banning surface mining would have an unduly harsh impact on the very areas of the state they claim to protect. Even more importantly, if successful in their attempts to eliminate the use of valley fills, Haltom and his cohorts would destroy deep mining, too, because these same fills are a necessary part of underground mining.

Haltom also demonstrates economic naivete when he says that a "good portion" of the revenue derived from mining, oil, gas and supporting activities in West Virginia goes "out of state." This oft-repeated claim is silly at best and is a transparent attempt to exploit outmoded prejudices. In the 21st century, only a rank simpleton would contend that our economy is sustainable without commerce among other states and even other nations.

The anti-mining extremists' creed damns coal companies from being publicly held and having diverse shareholder ownership but ignores the fact that many other common businesses that West Virginians visit daily, like Kroger, Wal-Mart, McDonalds, Sears, Home Depot and on and on are "out-of-state companies." Indeed, my employer, International Coal Group Inc., chose to invest millions of dollars in West Virginia and headquarter itself in Scott Depot. "Out-of-state companies" have invested billions of dollars in West Virginia, created thousands of jobs and contributed significant sums to local charitable organizations.

Coal River Mountain Watch's criticism on this particular issue highlights quite nicely the extremists' hypocrisy. Apparently the anti-mining extremist groups believe it inappropriate for out-of-state investors to invest in West Virginia, or at least to expect a return on that investment.

I wonder if the anti-mining groups turn down contributions from those out-of-state donors who want to put West Virginia miners out of work? The answer is "no" -- Coal River Mountain Watch obtains a very large part of its funding from out-of-state foundations.

Regarding severance taxes, all counties, whether they produce coal or not, receive severance taxes paid by the coal industry. West Virginia counties and municipalities in West Virginia depend on severance taxes to help fund governmental services. This is the reason that county officials have testified against the anti-mining extremists in recent court cases and have confirmed the

devastating impact to those counties if that source of funding--mining--is cut off by anti-mining efforts.

To replace coal mining, Haltom advocates the Coal River Mountain Wind Project and says it would "more than compensate for Raleigh County, and do so forever." The coal industry fully supports wind projects and other forms of renewable energy to supplement coal, but the particular wind project that the Coal River Mountain Watch has been trumpeting is not even real. Why? Because Haltom's group owns no land and will not fund the project -- they seek to tell others what to do with their land and their money. Their own study indicates that a wind project there would provide only "40-50 permanent maintenance jobs," only a fraction of even a single mining complex.

Finally, Haltom cuts to the chase, delivering a polemic that accuses the coal industry of being an "outlaw" that routinely ignores safety and environmental laws and thereby exhibits "sociopathic" and "criminal" behavior. These blanket insults are nonsensical yet routine from Haltom and his cohorts. The fact is the coal industry is heavily regulated by both state and federal governments. Indeed, each mining operation in the state is scrutinized on virtually a daily basis by inspectors from state and federal regulatory agencies. That is like having the fire marshal and an IRS auditor live at your house and accompany you to your job. The coal mining industry spends millions of dollars to comply with a complex set of safety and environmental laws and regulations annually.

For all their rhetoric, the anti-mining groups cannot mask the truth that coal mining is important to our state and its citizens. As citizens, the coal industry welcomes the additional tools of renewable energy in reaching energy independence for our nation. However, coal, our most abundant resource, should remain the backbone of our nation's energy supply.

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