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Louise Rubacky

Policy and Rhetoric Ignore Real Limits of Nation's Coal Reserves

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For some time now, the notion that America has an all but bottomless cheap supply of coal has been accepted, a “meme” that has become embedded in our society. Obama regularly refers to the nation's vast coal reserves, using the comforting cliché “We’re the Saudi Arabia of coal,” both in speeches while campaigning for President, as well as since taking office. Other elected representatives and thought leaders have preceded and followed with similar hyperbole.

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Several years ago, Leslie Glustrom, a former biochemist dogged by the myriad dangers of burning coal, began to investigate if the hyperbole was true. Approaching the subject with a “beginner’s mind,” as she put it, she asked a lot of questions and slogged through numerous agency reports and studies, to find out if the national dependence on coal for energy made sense.

What she found challenges the comforting vision of endless supplies of cheap coal, and the politics that depend upon the illusion.

In 2006, Glustrom co-founded Clean Energy Action, a “citizen power” organization to educate and prod the public, legislators and corporate CEOs toward a speedier transition from fossil fuels to clean energy. She also takes every opportunity to publicly dispel the belief that boundless low-cost coal is reliably ours for the next two centuries.

According to Glustrom, “The myth is largely based on unexamined assumptions.” Her 2009 report “Coal, Cheap and Abundant... or Is It?” highlights the difference between resources—coal that’s in the ground, and reserves—coal that is recoverable at an economically competitive price.

Glustrom writes: “The concept of ‘200 years of coal (or more)’ gets repeated by journalists, teachers, policy makers, utility executives and even Presidential candidates—yet it is based on an inaccurate assumption that ‘reserves’ will be economically accessible, while there is abundant evidence from detailed geologic surveys, including the ones discussed below, that only a small fraction of reserves will be economically accessible.”

Potential coal shortages have been covered or mentioned in the mainstream press, but not nearly as often as the “bottomless pit” belief. People like Glustrom persevere in the work of keeping the facts straight and presenting them often, but the meme persists. Joe Romm, of the daily blog Climate Progress, pointed out in an April 12th post how Newsweek is still getting it wrong, understating the true cost of coal production and delivery in dollars, health and lives, and overstating the amount of coal used for energy in the U.S. by double.

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Murky coal statistics

For corporations and politicians, money and power are of course at stake. But in the frenzied 24/7 news world,

beyond the ease of using "common knowledge" expediently at the expense of accuracy, part of the reason for this meme could be that official studies pertaining to coal are nearly as impenetrable as some of the earthly depths in which the coal lies.

It was notable, then, that in June 2009, the Wall Street Journal ran a clearly understandable front page story titled "U.S. Foresees a Thinner Cushion of Coal," (sub required) which mapped out some of the variances in official statistics about the outlook for coal.

According to that article, the USGS posits that the long term estimates for coal energy in the U.S. is 20-30 years, not the regularly repeated and reported 150-200 years. The DOE's Energy Information Administration (EIA) has a new study in the works to update estimates, due out this year.

Meanwhile, coal proponents still tout the centuries of coal at our fingertips, despite the situation Glustrom described in her 2009 report: "It appears that the source of much of the misunderstanding about American coal supplies can be traced to how the EIA has used the term 'reserves'—which is widely understood to include an assessment of economic recoverability—while at the same time EIA acknowledges that they do not have the 'economic and engineering data to project mining and development costs.'"

The EIA acknowledged this failing in 1997, yet they still do not incorporate such data in their projections. EIA also uses different terminology than USGS regarding supplies, so while it would be reasonable to expect accurate statistics from either government agency, the language is confusing. The differences between EIA's coal categories of Recoverable Reserves, Estimated Recoverable Reserves and the Demonstrated Reserve Base are not obvious from the names.

Then there is the matter of the energy content of various types of coal. Anthracite is the most energy intensive, with bituminous, sub-bituminous and lignite following, in descending order of energy value. Most of the anthracite in the U.S. has been mined, leaving some to conclude that our country has already passed the point of peak coal.

Like much of the coal that is included in the 200-plus year supply projection, more digging for information is required.

But not many average citizens get their information from think tanks, non-profit reports or the EIA website. (Or the World Coal Institute's, which is made up of industry groups. They expect coal use to go up 60 percent in the next 20 years, though it is not clear whether that estimate includes increased usage that would accompany widespread carbon capture and sequestration, CCS.)

That the EIA site contains confusing or conflicting information creates the potential for mistakes born of an innocent need for speed, or the easy option of choosing the scenario that fits the agenda, may it be driven by industry or politics – or both.

More damaging in terms of the spread of misinformation, the American Coalition of Clean Coal Electricity (ACCES) buys advertising time on mainstream TV stations. The ads are appealing because they portray everywoman/man types telling stories about their great jobs, their interest in the environment, and how their work keeps the lights on in America. One also boasts that there are 100 billion tons of coal in the Powder River Basin alone, the region that sits in Wyoming and Montana. (Americans use about 1 billion tons of coal a year.)

The meme's effect

There are a number of implications to the widespread belief that coal is plentiful for the foreseeable future. One is a "failsafe" mindset that leaves politicians stuck in the past. If representatives of coal states believe that big business and jobs are braided into a long-term coal future, they are not motivated to move off that position. But the economics of renewable energy are far more attractive, and will only become more so, if the costs and supplies of coal extraction and burning are not so rosy as the coal industry would have Americans think.

The coal meme also helps support a schizophrenic energy policy. The Obama administration speaks out against dirty coal, but subsidies for it are embedded into current policy. As the April 2010 report from the independent group Synapse Energy Economics, Inc., prepared for the Energy Foundation, shows, American tax dollars are still supporting the coal industry in the form of tax-exempt loans to the industry, DOE tax credits, and financial backing to the World Bank, which finances fossil fuel extraction globally.

And given the as-of-yet unrealized quest for clean coal, it is difficult to see Obama's recent executive memo ordering a task force "to speed the commercial development and deployment of clean coal technologies" as anything more than courting coal state support.

Even if affordable CCS technology magically emerges soon, the process takes about 20 percent more coal to produce the same amount of energy cleanly, so the reserves will last many fewer years.

Correcting the misconception

Glustrom does not see industry or media conspiracies behind the misbegotten coal meme. She simply figures that it will take several more years of coal constraint stories for the country to accept that the likely supply will serve Americans a small fraction of 200 years, and that the costs of retrieval will only go up.

She also noted that the coal constraint story is much more prominent in Asia, where coal plants remained idle this winter due to transport issues, and that the story may begin to drift west, given the increasing role of Asia in all things energy related.

The recent tragic events involving the production of fossil fuels, like the Massey mining accidents and the Gulf coast oil disaster, may help carry the idea that earth's powerful natural forces often outfox the best in human engineering, and eventually trump neglect. These stories, if heeded as warning signs, will also hopefully spur wider coverage of coal reserve realities.

Post-scriptum :

Louise Rubacky is an editor and filmmaker who is developing a documentary series on clean economy innovators.