

The News-Gazette

Ending Clean Power Plan did no one any favors

Andrew Rehn and Amanda Pankau

November 5, 2017

Scott Pruitt, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, did the coal industry and no one else a favor when he eliminated the Clean Power Plan. Phil Gonet, president of the Illinois Coal Association, echoed the industry's views in his News-Gazette guest commentary, where he understated the environmental effect of coal and inaccurately blamed regulation, instead of market forces, for coal's economic decline.

Every industry targeted with carbon regulation will dismiss its impact on climate change as small. On a global carbon scale, Gonet argues that the plan's impact was insignificant. He cites a 0.018 degrees celcius reduction of temperature estimated by the Cato Institute. However, this estimate depends on the assumed scenarios of future emissions. By Cato's own numbers, the effect is 0.067 C in high-emission scenarios, which would bring the world 4 percent of the way to the goal of limiting temperature rise to below 2 C. Coming from just one sector of one country, this would have been real progress toward global climate goals.

The coal industry often fails to acknowledge that carbon isn't the only pollutant it is emitting. Emissions from coal-fired power plants are documented to cause respiratory and cardiovascular problems and premature death. An analysis by President Donald Trump's own EPA found that reduced emissions from the plan could have prevented up to 4,500 premature deaths per year by 2030.

Coal ash pollutes groundwater at nearly every coal-fired power plant in the state. Illinois' rivers and lakes are so contaminated with mercury from burning coal that there is a statewide advisory against eating more than one meal of sport fish per week for certain populations. These environmental and health costs are not considered in the economics of the energy sector.

While the industry publicly blames its financial woes on environmental regulations, the real cause comes primarily from market forces. A new report out last week from the independent, nonpartisan organization Resources for the Future found that natural gas and renewables, not regulations, explain nearly all the industry's profitability decline and coal plant retirements.

In Illinois, the public will have to pay if they want to keep coal plants burning (and they may not survive either way). Illinois' largest coal plant operator, Texas-based Dynegy, is seeking legislation to bail out its fleet that is estimated to cost every Illinois household \$115 per year. In another effort to save costs, it is working with Gov. Bruce Rauner's Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to loosen air-pollutant regulations. Surprisingly, despite searching for bailouts, Dynegy was just sold in a \$1.7 billion dollar deal to Vistra Energy, who clearly thought Dynegy was profitable enough to buy.

Our citizens' money should be used to invest in renewable-energy sources and updated grids that will ultimately lead to cheaper, more reliable sources of energy — not to bail out a dying,

uneconomical industry to benefit out-of-state companies and investors. Last year, Illinois' decided to invest in its renewable-energy economy by passing the Future Energy Jobs Act.

By 2030, with the new law's programs and incentives, the state can expect to produce about 8,300 megawatts of energy from wind and solar, a 100 percent increase and more energy than Dynegy's Illinois coal-fired power plants produce. When the law's programs go into effect in 2018, unprecedented growth in solar, wind and energy-efficiency jobs are expected. The Natural Resources Defense Council has estimated that the work needed to meet just the energy-efficiency goals in the law could create more than 7,000 jobs per year between now and 2030 and add \$700 million to the state's economy annually.

Of course, Illinois alone cannot solve climate change, and limiting climate change's impact will take global effort. That is why the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Accord and Pruitt's elimination of the Clean Power Plan are so damaging. The plan, and other carbon reducing policies, were our commitments to the Paris Accord agreement.

The U.S. should be a world leader on this issue. No single country is going to unilaterally solve climate change, which means that each country, each state, and each industry sector needs to do its part.