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Climate: Debate is warming

President Obama, heading to next week's world climate summit in Copenhagen, pledged that America will reduce its carbon pollution - a promise contingent upon Senate passage of the controversial cap-and-trade bill previously approved by the House of Representatives, a cleanup proposal resisted fervently by this state's congressional delegation.

Coal-dominated West Virginia has much at stake in the ongoing struggle over global warming. To shed light on the stormy topic, two important debates are scheduled at the University of Charleston:

On Monday - the same day the Copenhagen summit begins - the Gazette and Daily Mail will sponsor a match between Patrick Michaels of the conservative Cato Institute and David Hawkins of the environmentalist National Resources Defense Council. The former contends that reducing carbon pollution will "cause great economic disruption" in West Virginia - but the latter says a cleanup is inevitable, regardless of how intensely the coal industry fights.

On Jan. 21, national pollution-battler Robert F. Kennedy Jr. will face Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship over harmful aspects of coal. Kennedy calls mountaintop removal mining "the greatest environmental tragedy ever to befall our nation." Decapitation permits constitute a "death sentence" for West Virginia streams, mountains, forests and towns, he says. But Blankenship implies that attempts to curtail coal ravages are a death sentence for his vital industry. He calls the menace of global warming "pure make-believe."

In the Huffington Post, Kennedy warned that China is leaping far ahead in creating solar panels and wind turbines, two essentials for "America's transition to a market-based de-carbonized economy." Large U.S. solar and wind projects must use equipment purchased from China, he wrote, because American industries are in denial. "The treacherous U.S. Chamber of Commerce [is] always willing to put its obsequious scraping to Big Oil and King Coal ahead of its duty to our country," Kennedy said.

As the Copenhagen summit nears, an Associated Press analysis concluded that heating of the planet is real and dangerous. Since the 1997 Kyoto accord attempted to impose worldwide limits on greenhouse gases, it said, sea level has risen 1.5 inches, droughts and wildfires have worsened, Arctic ice the size of Alaska has vanished, and melting permafrost is loosing stored methane into the sky.

The battle over carbon pollution and global warming is a crucial international showdown. West Virginia especially will be affected by the outcome of this scientific confrontation. Most world scientists concur that the peril is genuine - but a few disagree. Last week, computer hackers found confidential e-mails in Britain's Climate Research Unit in which warming supporters vowed to obstruct publication of opposing views. Conservative voices such as the Wheeling News-Register demanded a congressional investigation into "doctored 'scientific' research." But majority scientists reply that dissenter reports disrupt the search for facts because right-wing politicians ballyhoo the minority studies far beyond their importance.

We've often said that West Virginia's economic future sorely needs breakthroughs in "clean coal" technology - but such breakthroughs have been exceedingly slow and costly. More than most other places, the Mountain State has a lot riding on the worldwide carbon debate. Watch it closely.