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UC hosts faceoff between global warming skeptic, climate change expert

By [Eric Eyre](#)

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- It's a warm-up act of sorts.

A global warming skeptic and leading climate change expert plan to face off during a Dec. 7 debate at the University of Charleston.

Patrick Michaels, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, and David Hawkins, director of Climate Change at the National Resources Defense Council, will debate the potential effect of federal "cap-and-trade" legislation on West Virginia's economy at the University of Charleston's Geary Auditorium. UC President Ed Welch will moderate.

The following month, Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship and environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. will square off on the same UC stage and debate many of the same issues - America's energy policy and climate change.

In an interview with the Gazette-Mail, Michaels predicted that cap-and-trade legislation would prompt job losses in West Virginia - and not just in the coal industry. Railroad, trucking and other businesses that support mining also would suffer, he said.

"Cap and trade will put coal at a disadvantage unless the carbon dioxide from the combustion of coal is captured and stored," said Michaels, a fellow in environmental studies at The Cato Institute, a conservative think-tank. "It will cause great economic disruption, particularly in West Virginia, and you're not going to get any noticeable climatic effect."

Hawkins, an expert on greenhouse emissions, has an entirely different view of cap and trade. He suggested that West Virginia look at the legislation as an opportunity for economic growth.

"This is an issue West Virginia politicians should embrace, rather than close their eyes and hope it goes away, because it won't go away," said Hawkins, who advocates market-base approaches, such as cap and trade, to solve environmental problems. "Since a significant part of West Virginia's economy depends on coal production, it's a challenge, but the way you deal with a challenge is not by ignoring it."

Under cap and trade, the federal government would establish the maximum amount of carbon dioxide emissions that U.S. companies could put in the atmosphere. The businesses would then buy and sell permits to emit greenhouse gases. In other words, the plan calls for making polluters pay for damaging the environment.

The U.S. House already has passed cap-and-trade legislation. The proposal is under consideration in the Senate.

Hawkins said developers and investors understand that the climate change issue isn't going to go away, and that additional regulations will be enacted to reduce carbon emissions.

"The business model going forward is climate change is a problem, and there will be policies to deal with it," Hawkins said. "West Virginia needs to be proactive and look for ways to shape climate change legislation so it can provide a pathway of opportunities that West Virginia can take advantage of."

Hawkins said West Virginia is positioned to be at the forefront of carbon capture and storage -

seizing carbon dioxide from at power plants and storing it underground.

The cap-and-trade legislation sets aside \$150 billion for carbon capture and storage projects, Hawkins said.

The legislation is designed to reduce greenhouse gases by 17 percent by 2020, and by 83 percent by 2050.

Michaels, a frequent speaker at events sponsored the energy industry, argues that the U.S. should take no action because new technologies will replace those that emit greenhouse gases.

He said predictions about global warming have been flat-out wrong.

"The major point [during the debate] will be how much warming we've had compared to what has been predicted, and what policies are justifiable by these observations," Michaels said. "The warming that has been observed is less than what was predicted. You have to look at actual climate history."

Hawkins that the use of coal and other fossil fuels threatens to wreak havoc with the earth's climate system.

"The reality is global warming is a genuine problem which is going to intensify," Hawkins said. "And with that intensity, there will be a chance to deal with it."

The Rotary Club of Charleston is organizing the debate, which starts at 6 p.m and is open to the public. The Charleston Gazette and Charleston Daily Mail are the main sponsors.

"The issue of cap and trade and how we respond to that legislation, whatever form it ultimately takes, is important to all West Virginians," said Park Chapman, the Rotary Club's program chairman who also works for Charleston Newspapers. "Our tax base and a large number of jobs are still heavily dependent on coal."

The Jan. 21 debate between Blankenship and Kennedy at UC is an invitation-only event.

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