

There's a lot of light at end of coal shaft if you look at it right

BY SOPHIA PETERSON

You and I have heard/read more than enough discouraging news about our state, so when I came across some good news, I said to myself, "I've got to share this."

First, I want to relate how West Virginia has addressed the fact that our environmental problems are compounded by coal companies resorting to the bankruptcy court to avoid fulfilling their cleanup obligations after mine closings.

Second, I would like to share news about the cooperation of the White House and members of the U.S. House of Representatives to provide substantial financial support to help create new jobs, re-train former miners, and "empower ... communities to imagine new economic opportunities."

As mines close serious environmental problems follow. In its front-page article (June 7) on Appalachian coal mine closings, "\$1 Billion Coal Cleanup, but Who Gets the Bill?" the *New York Times* explained how coal companies try to avoid restoring wa-

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terways and land by turning to the bankruptcy courts as Alpha Natural Resources (our largest coal producer) did recently in West Virginia.

To represent our state, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) appointed as special assistant attorney general Kevin W. Barrett, a bankruptcy attorney with 15 years' experience in the largest bankruptcy law firm in New York, now associated with the Charleston law firm Bailey and Glasser.

Barrett is also a native son who was born and grew up in our state hearing the rumble of coal trains in West Virginia. This native son expresses his purpose clearly in the Alpha case: "The goal is to make sure the coal companies clean up the mess when they leave."

That Barrett and the DEP were successful was demonstrated June 9 by DEP Director Randy Huffman's public announcement that our state had reached a \$300 million-

plus "agreement in principle" with Alpha Natural Resources.

Huffman described the significance of this agreement as follows: "This deal is a win-win for West Virginia. Hundreds of millions of dollars in funds will be devoted to bonding and reclaiming Alpha's mining sites, and its existing workforce will continue to be employed at Alpha's West Virginia mines."

The second piece of good news relates to the social and economic impact of closing coal mines, which brought unemployment and the collapse of a major sector of our economy.

To address this situation, a significant step forward is President Obama's multi-billion POWER+Plan to help the coal states as follows: "The Plan provides new resources for economic diversification, job creation, job training, and other employment services for workers and communities impacted by layoffs at coal mines and coal-fired power plants; includes unprecedented investments in the health and retired security of

mineworkers and their families." The plan was included and passed in the 2016 federal budget, although not fully funded.

Full funding of the plan is being sought by means of the Reclaim Act, a bill introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives this year by a bipartisan group of House members from four coal-producing states: West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky and Pennsylvania.

These House members are consulting with the White House to use the Reclaim Act to gain access to \$1 billion from \$2.5 billion unused in the Abandoned Mine Lands fund accumulated from coal company fees for cleaning up mines.

Under current rules, these unused funds cannot be released until 2021. If this date is modified as intended by the Reclaim bill, then the goals of the POWER+Plan can be achieved: "To create long-term economic opportunities in agriculture, energy, recreational tourism."

Public support of the POWER+Plan in the region is demonstrated by announcements of public support from 26 localities and groups

(including the city of Morgantown). The passage of the Reclaim Act by Congress is essential to fully fund POWER+Plan and public support is vital to seeing this happen. In the meantime, more modest programs are carrying out pilot projects.

The development of alternative economic opportunities in our state is essential to job creation.

Wyoming, the nation's biggest coal-producing state, is already on its way to developing wind energy as one promising alternative to coal as reported by Cindy Wallace, the director of the Carbon County Economic Development Corp.: "Coal is hurting, but wind power is our bright spot on the horizon. Eventually, we could be the wind capital of Wyoming, the U.S., the world."

This is testimony to what is possible and what the 584,000 residents of Wyoming have achieved.

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