

Do we even need coal now that we have electricity?

Barry Thacker
Saturday, March 8, 2008

The Tennessee Legislature is considering the Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act. Although its intent is to outlaw surface mining on mountain ridges, the language of the act may have more widespread impact.

Specific-ally, coal mined by the underground mining method results in impurities - i.e., shale, clay, sand, etc. - being extracted with the coal.

Deep-mined coal must typically be cleaned in a processing plant to remove impurities before that coal is burned in a power plant to meet the requirements of the Clean Air Act.

Two-thirds of the coal mined in the United States is by surface mining, and most surface-mined coal cannot be mined economically by underground mining methods.

Surface mining allows coal to be removed selectively so it does not have to be cleaned in a coal-processing plant, but much more overburden rock fill must be removed to access coal seams than by deep mining. The proposed legislation would ban placement of fill within 100 feet of streams, which mining opponents want defined as having a drainage area of 14 acres or more.

If this legislation is passed, it could essentially ban all coal mining because impurities removed from deep-mined coal require more than 14 acres for disposal, and even small surface mines disturb more than 14 acres.

In Tennessee, 64 percent of our electricity is generated by burning coal. The Tennessee Valley Authority tried to eliminate the need for burning coal in the 1970s with its plan to build replacement nuclear reactors, but public concerns about safety and high costs forced the plan to be abandoned.

That failed effort put TVA billions of dollars in debt with little benefit, as evidenced by the fact that more coal is burned today to generate electricity than in the 1970s.



What happens if all states pass legislation similar to the Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act? No coal mining means that 64 percent of folks in Tennessee will have no electricity.

I suggest that environmentally conscious ratepayers who recognize that coal mining is essential for generating electricity should get involved with returning mined land to productive use. An example is Operation Springboard, the plan for restoring the American chestnut to mined land in the Appalachian Mountains.

The first major planting of American chestnuts on mined land in Tennessee will be on Friday, March 14, at the Zeb Mountain surface mine of National Coal Corp.

To participate in the restoration effort and learn why we still need coal now that we have electricity, contact Carol Moore at clmoore@geoe.com or visit www.coalcreekaml.com for details.

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