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## Coal Forum Focuses on Future of Energy

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**Solar, wind, nuclear and other forms of renewable power all are sure to be part of the equation to solve the nation's energy problems. But for the foreseeable future, coal will continue to be part of the mix.**

Story by Paul Darst

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CHARLESTON -- Solar, wind, nuclear and other forms of renewable power all are sure to be part of the equation to solve the nation's energy problems.

But for the foreseeable future, coal will continue to be part of the mix. That was the apparent consensus at The Coal Forum's energy forum Aug. 19 at the Embassy Suites. The event featured elected officials, coal industry leaders, environmental advocates and union officials. It was sponsored by Marshall University.

"We know what our dependence on foreign oil has done," Gov. Joe Manchin said. "During the oil embargo (in the 70s), we (imported) 24 percent of our oil. We know what that did to us. Today, we import 60 percent of our oil."

During the event, a panel discussed a new report by Imagine West Virginia: "Coal: Energy, the Environment & West Virginia Policy Recommendations."

The panel consisted of Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association; Allan Tweddle, a West Virginia Public Energy Authority board member; Christine Risch, director of research at the Marshall Center for Business and Economic Research; D. Stephen Walker, chief operating officer for Cecil I. Walker Machinery Co.; and Roger Horton of the United Mine Workers union.

The Imagine West Virginia report focused on how West Virginia can help solve the country's energy problems, said Tom Heywood, an Image West Virginia board member.

"World energy demand is rising to new levels in perpetuity," he said. "How do we meet that demand?"

Coal and other fossil fuels must be part of the solution, but we need to focus on research to make them more environmentally friendly, Heywood said.

"We can be a shaping force in this debate," he said. "It's not a pipe dream. We have all the essential ingredients."

The report contains 10 recommendations:

1. Strengthen coal-related research.
2. Promote expertise in mining safety and remediation.
3. Develop the next generation of coal leadership.
4. Train tomorrow's coal-related work force.
5. Foster new coal-related business enterprises.
6. Engage in more strategic regional collaborative initiatives.
7. Build greater advanced coal technology capabilities.
8. Establish a coalition for global efforts in coal.
9. Participate in effective organizations that advance coal.
10. Create an independent energy advisory body.

The report's emphasis on the need for coal research is important, Raney said during the panel discussion.

"I think we're close to a no-emissions coal-fired power plant," he said. "We need research dollars. The state and federal governments need to take the lead in this. It's all about America's energy security."

The economic benefits of a healthy coal industry also are important, Walker said. His company is an example of the multiplier effect of the industry.

"Coal is 80 percent of our revenues," he said. "If anything happens to coal, we're gone."

Walker estimated that up to 1,500 people, including employees and their families, directly depend upon his company's well-being.

The panel's sole representative from the environmental advocacy community agreed that the state's coal industry can continue to thrive, but we need to start shifting away from using it as a source of power.

"Coal prices are going through the roof," Tweddle said. "The contracts (at lower prices) will expire, and the costs are going to increase within the next year or so. That will put economic pressure on coal-fired power plants."

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Tweddle said more focus should be put on greener forms of energy production. He mentioned research with a form of algae that can produce the equivalent of 14,000 barrels of oil per acre. And the algae use carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, to boot. Those kinds of innovative approaches are the future, Tweddle said.

But most of the methods for producing renewable energy devices require power produced by coal, Horton said.

"Whether we like it or not, we have to use coal," he said. "Nothing exists that can replace it today. ... The parts for a windmill are made of steel. You need coal to make the steel."

Other research involves the use of waste coal and coal-to-liquid fuels, Risch said. And CTL technology can use waste coal, she said.

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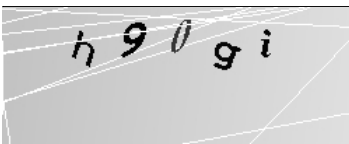
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