Last plants standing

The Clean Power Plan is a blow to the struggling coal industry, but not the fatal one

BY CALLY CARSWELL

On a Thursday afternoon in early August, Wyoming’s governor, both its U.S. senators and its lone House representative joined dozens of coal miners and other locals in a library in the town of Gillette. The Bureau of Land Management — under pressure to reform its coal-leasing program — was holding a listening session on royalty rates for federal coal, and Wyoming’s political heavyweights had opinions to share.

They all vigorously opposed raising the rates. But the frustration and fear they expressed had at least as much to do with President Barack Obama’s announcement a week earlier that power plants would soon have to answer for their carbon pollution.

Finalized Aug. 3, the Clean Power Plan sets carbon-reduction targets for 2030, for states and tribes with power plants. Nationwide, the plan is expected to yield a 32 percent cut in emissions from 2005 levels.

It’s worth remembering that while Obama and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had some choice in how to regulate carbon dioxide, they had no choice in whether to regulate it. Supreme Court decisions since 2007 have affirmed that carbon is a pollutant the EPA is legally required to control.

Still, the coal states’ hostility is understandable. Coal is responsible for 75 percent of the electricity sector’s carbon emissions, and aside from improving energy efficiency, the easiest way to cut climate-changing pollution is to start burning less of it. There’s room under the plan for natural gas, wind and solar to grow, but barring major advancements in carbon-capture technology, coal has no option but to shrink.

Despite this, the plan isn’t a certain deathblow for the West’s oldest facilities. That’s partly because a number of those units are already slated for closure, either to comply with federal regulations to clear air from national parks and wilderness areas, or to meet states’ carbon goals. Any shutdowns after 2012 will count toward the 2030 targets and could go a long way toward helping to meet them.

Take the Navajo Generating Station and Four Corners Power Plant, both of which sit on the Navajo Nation. Under the Clean Power Plan’s draft version, released last year, the Navajo would have had no progress toward helping to meet them.

Wild graffiti

Urban vandals target Western parks

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Vandals tagged rocks near Yellowstone’s Kelly’s Grave with orange spray paint in Yellowstone National Park in 2014.

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Snapshot

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