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## Coal Is Bad News for Us All

I have a very extensive file of information about the environment. Actually its size evokes a groan in me this time of year when thorough file pruning is needed.

One file folder among the many in the deep file drawer is devoted to coal.

Now Kentucky has a lot of interest in coal – because Kentucky has a very large amount of it. It has been a major factor in our economy for a long time now. It largely accounts for our very low rates for electricity.

However, Todd Larsen with Co-op America cites a recent poll that says almost 90% of US people surveyed favor a coal plants moratorium. In the heart of hearts of many people is the growing realization that coal is not clean or good for us in the long run.

There are 4 big problem areas regarding coal.

First it takes a tremendous environmental toll on areas where it is mined and on the workers who mine it. We would be wise to pay attention to all reports about the problems with a “mountain-top removal” process to cheaply get at coal. This process is used extensively in the eastern part of our commonwealth. The displaced rock and soil get dumped into the valleys, damming up streams and seriously contaminating water sources. When/if a richly diversified ecosystem is replaced, it has become a monosystem with all the losses this signifies.

Second, we are a long time away from any “clean” processes for burning coal. Storing coal’s emissions underground is far from leak-proof over the very long period of time needed. Trying to do so is reportedly very expensive – in league with the cost of building a nuclear plant.

Third, building coal plants has become prohibitively expensive, costs tripling. Once built, there are still more costs for operation, emissions storing and coal purchase.

Fourth, around 30,000 people die a year in the US from coal’s pollution – a figure larger than deaths from

drunk driving, AIDS, or murders, says the Clean Air Task Force. Coal’s pollution is linked to illnesses such as lung cancer, emphysema, asthma and heart diseases. The mercury involved evokes birth defects.

Looking to increased use of coal thus seems to be another of those things we can do, but for our own welfare and that of the common good should not do. If China’s contribution to pollution comes significantly from all the coal-fired plants they are building and using and that is bad (the more so as their winds blow our way), then it is bad for Kentucky to contribute to greater use of contaminating coal.

Won’t we instead need to focus much more on greater efficiency and conservation in all uses of electricity? On development of policies to protect our people who are economically poor as electricity rates increase? Side-step any temptation to look to very highly problematic nuclear power for help?

Decades ago there was a Kentucky tourism film shown at Louisville’s tourist center. It concluded with an observation about Kentucky’s economy by one of our great Kentucky leaders. John Sherman Cooper noted that with Kentucky dependence on horses, bourbon and coal, we were in great trouble if the country ever got a fit of morality. Well, it looks like we are growing in moral wisdom now, none too soon.

Let’s put our considerable human ingenuity to other sources of economic activity. Areas of green technology are calling out loudly for our attention.

Visit Co-op America, too, at [www.coopamerica.com](http://www.coopamerica.com)!

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*The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.*