On Campus

Old King Coal

Digging for answers about the future of fossil fuels.

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You might say that President Donald Trump ran his campaign on coal (among other combustibles), promising to revive an industry in precipitous decline. “America is sitting on a treasure trove of untapped energy,” Trump has said, declaring that there are “hundreds of years of coal energy reserves.”

Sally Jewell suggests a different course.

On January 11, a week before Trump’s inauguration, and with just days left in her tenure, Jewell, the US secretary of the interior, appeared at the Columbia Club at Fifth Avenue and East 43rd to share some hard coal facts with an audience of seventy people. Seated next to her was Jason Bordoff, director of Columbia’s Center on Global Energy Policy, which sponsored the event as part of its Energy Leaders Forum.

That morning, the Department of the Interior, the federal agency that manages public lands and natural resources, had released a comprehensive 190-page report on the federal coal-leasing program. Forty-two percent of the electricity-generating coal in the US is mined on federal land, and that coal, Jewell noted, accounts for 10 percent of the country’s greenhouse-gas emissions.

Jewell, a former oil-and-gas engineer, banker, and CEO of the outdoor-gear company REI who became interior secretary in 2013, had ordered the coal report last winter after touring coal country and speaking with energy and climate experts. There hadn’t been an assessment since the 1980s, and Jewell found that the coal program was plagued by inefficiencies: no-bid contracts, undervalued leases, a lack of transparency, and poor returns for taxpayers. In January 2016 she announced that her department was “hitting pause” on new coal-mining leases beyond the coal reserves already under contract (an estimated twenty years’ worth at current production levels).

Trump has vowed to lift this leasing moratorium — what he decried as the Obama administration’s “war on coal” — but Jewell thought that decision makers should at least have the benefit of the review’s recommendations.

She also hoped that the next interior secretary, Congressman Ryan Zinke of Montana, would read the report, which Jewell said “will be incredibly useful not just to my successor and people working in Interior, but also to outside communities and states, which get 50 percent of the revenue of the federal coal program.”

Bordoff then asked the big question: “How do you balance the need to produce resources that the economy depends on with the urgency of addressing climate change?”

Naturally, it was complicated. Coal-burning power plants are one of the country’s chief sources of carbon-dioxide emissions, and Jewell said she was in “the forever business,” safeguarding America’s land and water for posterity. But she was also in the consensus business. Throughout her talk she emphasized the importance of listening to all sides when making decisions, and after answering Bordoff’s question with some boilerplate (“We need to take the impact of our fossil-fuel production into account as it relates to the environment”), Jewell drilled down to the bone.

“We all burn fossil fuels,” she said. “We need to be practical about that. Part of the objective that I’ve had, and part of the demands of my job, is you take a long view. This isn’t short-run. It’s not ideological. You get in this chair and soon any ideology you had gets a bucket of ice water dumped on it by the very real situation you face on the ground: that we are dependent on fossil fuels and will be for the foreseeable future.”

The coal-program review offered some guidance for that future. It proposed directing a portion of federal coal revenues to assistance for communities affected by reduced coal production, and anticipated a transition in coal country to jobs in renewable energies: putting people to work manufacturing, installing, maintaining, and repairing wind turbines and solar panels.

It was all in the report, should anyone care to look.

“I hope,” said Jewell, “that local communities hold this next administration accountable for following through — not on bringing back an industry that is never going to be economic, but on being honest about what we need to do to put these really committed, hard-working people into work that will last.”

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