

Are we headed for a coal policy train wreck?

August 6, 2012 by Ken Ward Jr.

Over the weekend, there was certainly an interesting collection of news and commentary that, taken together, raises lots of questions about the future of the coal industry in our region.

First, there was the bombshell new study from climate scientist James Hansen, [as described by the great AP science writer Seth Borenstein](#):

The relentless, weather-gone-crazy type of heat that has blistered the United States and other parts of the world in recent years is so rare that it can't be anything but man-made global warming, says a new statistical analysis from a top government scientist.

The research by a man often called the "godfather of global warming" says that the likelihood of such temperatures occurring from the 1950s through the 1980s was rarer than 1 in 300. Now, the odds are closer to 1 in 10, according to the study by NASA scientist James Hansen. He says that statistically what's happening is not random or normal, but pure and simple climate change.

"This is not some scientific theory. We are now experiencing scientific fact," Hansen told The Associated Press in an interview.

You can read the study for yourself in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#), and also can check out Dr. Hansen's [op-ed](#) that was published in Sunday's Washington Post, in which he says:

This is the world we have changed, and now we have to live in it — the world that caused the 2003 heat wave in Europe that killed more than 50,000 people and the 2011 drought in Texas that caused more than \$5 billion in damage. Such events, our data show, will become even more frequent and more severe.

There is still time to act and avoid a worsening climate, but we are wasting precious time. We can solve the challenge of climate change with a gradually rising fee on carbon collected from fossil-fuel companies, with 100 percent of the money rebated to all legal residents on a per capita basis. This would stimulate innovations and create a robust clean-energy economy with millions of new jobs. It is a simple, honest and effective solution.

The future is now. And it is hot.

Meanwhile, over on the Gazette's outdoors page, my buddy John McCoy [had a story on Sunday](#) about efforts to seek federal protections for the "diamond darter":

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last week proposed that the diamond darter be placed on the federal Endangered Species List. If the silvery little member of the perch family becomes the first Mountain State fish to end up on the list, 23 miles of the Elk — from King Shoals downstream to Coonskin Park — would be considered the species' "critical habitat."

The story continues, quoting Dan Cincotta, the DNR's non-game fish biologist:

In fact, Cincotta believes there are more diamond darters today than there were in the 1980s.

"A lot of [water quality issues] have improved on the Elk since the Clean Water Act went into effect [in 1972]," he explained. "Several species, such as the spotted darter and the western sand darter, are more widespread now than they were back then."

Even so, Cincotta believes changes to water chemistry caused by mining and gas drilling have the potential to adversely affect the river's ecology.

"We're already finding substances such as sulfates and chlorides in Elk tributaries where mining is taking place, and we don't yet know what the effects of those substances will be on the river as a whole," he said. "Also, we don't know what impacts [gas] drilling might have."

In the Fish and Wildlife Service's news release on the diamond darter, the service's state field office supervisor said the Elk's waters "face pervasive threats from coal mining, oil and gas development, erosion, timber harvesting and poor wastewater treatment."

And in [an interesting op-ed commentary](#), Tierra Curry of the Center for Biological Diversity, explains why impacts of mining on a whole variety of creatures should matter to all of us:

... When you suddenly decimate the largest component of a food chain, it's bad news for the health of all kinds of animals for lots of years, maybe forever.

As a kid growing up in the Appalachian hills of Kentucky, I watched the coal companies strip bare the mountains around my home. It ruined our well water, cracked our windows and covered our daily lives in a blanket of dust. Turns out what's bad for salamanders is also bad for people.

We'd be wise not to ignore the plight of salamanders. Because they breathe through their skin and absorb the pollution around them, amphibians have long been considered an important early warning sign of the broader health of the environment. As frogs and salamanders go, so could the rest of us.

If pollution from mining decreases water quality, for example, it can cause the loss of entire populations of salamanders. But that's only the beginning of the destructive cycle that ripples throughout the food chain, including, in the case of highly mechanized mountaintop removal, pollution linked to cancer and birth defects in nearby human communities, and the crippling economic impacts of thousands of lost mining jobs.

Speaking of mining jobs, we ran in the print edition of the Sunday Gazette-Mail [a lengthy Lexington Herald-Leader story](#) (first mentioned in Friday's [news roundup here on Coal Tattoo](#)) that described the impacts of the current decline in the Appalachian coal industry:

The impact of an estimated 2,000 mining layoffs this year is hitting home across the mountainous coal counties of Eastern Kentucky.

Gary Hall of Pike County, whose job at a coal-washing plant is scheduled to last a few more weeks, might have to tap his retirement nest egg if he doesn't find mining work.

Kyle Thacker, laid off from his job as a utility worker at an underground mine, has thought about going back to school to become a welder, but said he might have to move from Knott County for work.

Jeremy Slone moved to Lexington with his wife, Marcie, and their 2-year-old son Braxton after he lost his job driving a giant dump truck at a Perry County surface mine in April. He's trying to get on at Toyota in Georgetown.

Other laid-off miners don't know what they will do.

The cutbacks will ricochet through the economy in an area where good-paying jobs, especially for people without college degrees, were in short supply even before hundreds evaporated.

"It's going to start hurting Wal-Mart, Lowe's, all these stores," said Hall, 51. "I don't know what all these coal miners are going to do. Some are going to lose their homes."

Herald-Leader reporter Bill Estep makes it pretty clear what is driving this trend:

Federal analysts project Central Appalachia is at the front end of a steep, long-lasting drop in coal production.

“Some of these mines are not going to come back,” said Michael Dudas, a managing director at investment firm Sterne, Agee & Leach, Inc. who follows the coal industry.

The belief in Eastern Kentucky is that federal environmental rules are to blame for the loss of coal jobs – the “war on coal” that officials in the region decry – but several analysts said other factors led to the layoffs this year.

Most notably, they pointed to historically low prices for natural gas and the unseasonably warm winter of 2011-12, which left power plants with stockpiles of coal.

Other factors, such as the slow recovery in manufacturing and the broader economy, also have played parts in the drop in demand for coal.

“Current market forces were the prime driver” in the layoffs, said Michael Tian, an analyst with Morningstar.

Then, oddly enough, we the Daily Mail story by Ry Rivard in which the West Virginia Coal Association of all groups [was upset about the tone of GOP candidate John Raese’s criticism of Sen. Joe Manchin](#). According to association Vice President Chris Hamilton:

The moderator of the program indicated, or asked, John Raese to temper his questions, both the tone and nature of his questions. John was rather aggressive and inappropriate for the forum that was under way and was asked repeatedly to withhold his attack on Sen. Manchin for another day, another forum.

Which brings me to [another op-ed commentary in Sunday’s paper](#), this one by Charleston resident Becky Park, describing what happened to her the day of the latest anti-mountaintop removal protest:

I found myself on a road where a coal miner said I had no right to be.

He stood in front of my car with an iron pipe. I rolled forward and he stepped up to my bumper. His wife and child sat in a four-wheeler 20 feet away. I knew I was on a county road but exactly where on the county map were we? Then a young man with a knapsack walked in from the other direction and the man with the iron pipe turned on this newcomer. I left my car and stood between them. For the next two hours we stood in the sun waiting for the law to arrive.

Earlier, a sign at the ice cream stand said there would be a mining protest and a counter-protest in the area, but I had passed two state cruisers long ago and believed they were escorting people away. Thinking the hoopla was probably over, I thought I might enjoy a rare day by myself in the country.

I had always wondered what I would say if someone accused me of being a treehugger. I am very guilty of loving trees. Moments before I had been admiring the hemlocks below the narrow gravel road.

I also love the hard-working people who run heavy equipment, so again and again I have found myself on the middle ground of this conflict. Turns out there was plenty of shared territory in this microcosmic stand-off: The young man whose presence was so offensive is at the bottom of the economic ladder — a manual laborer. The man with the iron pipe is a miner with fresh memories of bad treatment under Massey Energy. His retired miner father who moved in and out of this scene is against mountaintop removal, and both families — grandparents, parents and three good-looking boys — live off the grid using a combination of wind, solar and fuel-powered generators.

My thoughts from teetering on the balance of possible violence that day?

We are never going to move past being consumed by hate until we resolve to listen to our neighbors’ concerns. Every

sentence that we utter that begins with “They believe...” or “They think...” does two things: It paints real people as cartoons to be ridiculed and despised, and it makes us deaf to the stranger’s needs and heartfelt desires.

... At our worst in working out the future of Appalachia, we are manipulated by the most greedy, depraved operatives. Our ears are stopped, our hearts full of violence. At our best, we listen and think without malice. We combine talents and work to create a harmonious future full of the best that we are as Appalachians and Americans.

*Standing in the sun on that gravel road, teetering, waiting, we became real people to each other. We asked each other and listened to each other around the all-important question: **How do you want this to turn out?***