

# Phone Interviews

## Views and Insights from Transition Stakeholders

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### OVERVIEW

Resource Media interviewed more than a dozen stakeholders from Central Appalachia and beyond to better understand the goals, tactics and values of people working in sectors that can help create a just economic transition for the region. These interviews are part of a broader examination of “transition” work in Central Appalachia. As this project has progressed, we’ve returned to some stakeholders repeatedly with additional questions or to seek feedback on other aspects of the project such as a media audit and a synthesis of public opinion research.

### TOP LEVEL FINDINGS

We found areas of broad agreement, and some important areas of disagreement. In the context of the overall assessment, it’s worth noting that our interview findings are for the most part consistent with and complementary to what we discovered in the media/digital audit and the public opinion synthesis. Not surprisingly, we found universal agreement that the problems facing Central Appalachia are rooted in the pervasive influence of coal. We found some variation in the emphasis put on different impacts of that influence, from political corruption to a polarized conversation to a sense of hopelessness. But when you boil it down, it’s all about how coal has historically impacted Central Appalachia, and the persistence of that influence.

No one would be surprised to hear that finding. Along the same vein, those interviewed about the findings of the media audit and the public opinion synthesis, which examined the digital coverage of transition conversations and the values and beliefs that underpin these conversations, all had similar reactions: Yes. We already knew this.

We also found conceptual agreement about where we are trying to go. Interviewees are all basically trying to achieving the same thing: empowered communities with a rich variety of sustainable economic activity and opportunities.

Interviewees universally acknowledge the value and importance of telling solution stories. There’s a strong sense that we need to paint a picture of what’s possible in order to shift attention away from the past (coal) and toward a brighter future and the steps necessary to make it a reality. But, there’s also

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acknowledgement that we don't know what kind of solutions stories have the greatest impact or how to best make them a stronger part of the regional conversation.

Grantees are interested in understanding how to best address coal in their messaging and outreach given the near impossibility of keeping it out of the conversation. Many have instincts about how this should be done, but few expressed iron-clad confidence that their way is the right way.

So, there's agreement on where we are now and how we got here, there's agreement about where we are trying to go, and for the most part there's agreement on the barriers preventing us from getting there. But from there, things get more complicated. Interviewees have differing views on the most strategic way to get from point A to point B.

When we say interviewees have differing views, it's not so much a question of open disagreements. It's more that they have each chosen their own course and for the most part are operating pretty independently. In some cases, the strategies employed by one group may undermine the strategies employed by another. In other cases, there's not much apparent overlap or conflict. But overall, we're not seeing much synergy between efforts – the magic that transforms many individual efforts into a larger whole.

The general agreement on so many aspects of the challenges facing the region and alignment on overall vision suggest a reasonably solid foundation for collaboration and strategy discussions. But the divisions offer up some important strategic questions.

1. To the best of our knowledge, very little of the messaging currently in use has been directly tested through public opinion research, particularly as it pertains to specific target audiences. None of the opinion research we viewed provides good guidance on navigating the “coal” land mines and tapping into the region's core values. We don't know which of the messages currently in use to describe transition are most effective. Beyond anecdotal evidence, we don't know how current messaging is received by key target audiences such as coalfield elected officials, or governors, or women. We don't know if the messages groups are using are winning key people over or pushing them away. And given the political influence of the coal companies and deep anxieties people feel about what's happening to the region, getting the messaging right will be a critical element of success.

2. While there's nothing conceptually wrong with having multiple strategies to achieve a goal as large and ambitious as transitioning Appalachia from its coal-dependence to a more prosperous future, it can be problematic when it results in either an overall dilution of efforts or when strategies undermine one another. Right now, some groups (such as Appalachian Voices, Sierra Club) are applying pressure from outside the region to influence the future of the coal industry in Central Appalachia. We heard references to the Civil Rights Movement when talking about the need for outside pressure to force regional elected

officials to do what's needed. Other groups are working on the ground to influence local residents, communities and decision-makers, and they argue that you have to build relationships and work from the ground up to get projects off of the ground. These very local efforts depend on the cooperation and goodwill of local elected officials.

Similarly, some argued for a hard hitting campaign targeting the coal companies in order to undermine their credibility in the region; others argued that doing so would be akin to punching a tar baby.

These are just two examples of varying strategies. In both cases, it's not clear which will be most effective in accelerating a just economic transition: winning over local communities and decision-makers, or exerting pressure from outside the region to force their hands. A direct attack on the coal companies, their credibility and their motives? Or an approach that focuses on advancing alternatives with very little attention paid to coal?

Given the inevitability of multiple strategies—especially the inside/outside strategies given the scale and scope of the problems facing the region—what's the best way to prevent one strategy from undermining the other? And from a messaging perspective, are there ways of describing all of these efforts in a way that creates a narrative umbrella large enough for all to fit beneath?

3. Many of those interviewed expressed a sense of hope that the mood around transition is already changing and challenged the media audit as not reflective of the current conversation around transition. We have no empirical evidence that this is the case (but also no evidence that it's not the case). If we are indeed at some sort of tipping point, is it time for an aggressive campaign aimed at upending the current establishment, such as that championed by KFTC and the Center for Rural Strategies? Or is it time to ramp up efforts, like those of MACED and AppalShop, to bring people along gently, to ease them in to change? And what messaging best accelerates the tipping point? What messaging pulls us back from the tipping point?

Ultimately, the path from today's challenges to tomorrow's success is unclear—for us, and frankly for grantees. When it comes to communications, transition stakeholders are operating largely on instinct in choosing their direction. Some are very open about the fact that the messages and tactics they're using are tested primarily by trial and error—by “the focus group that is our work,” as Lisa Abbott of KFTC put it. But others are confident that their approach is the right approach, and suggestions of different directions may not be received well without some hard data to back them up.

Interviewees have excellent instincts honed by years—even decades—of work in the region. Yet, our experience working on tough environmental and conservation issues throughout the country has taught us time and time again that those with the deepest experience can often have blind spots.

We have our own instincts, but at this point we have more questions than answers when it comes to the best messaging framework and most effective outreach strategies.

The task blue moon and its grantees have set out to accomplish is daunting, and the barriers are considerable. While we have yet to prepare a full assessment capturing the various research threads, at this point it is clear that messaging research focused on understanding the aspirations of the region's residents and the messaging and imagery that can speak to those aspirations would help us understand how to tap into the views and values of key audiences while avoiding the many pitfalls that can impede progress. It would help stakeholders understand which solution stories are likely to have the greatest impact and how to best situate coal in the conversation. It would allow us to groundtruth the sense that we are at a tipping point and provide guidance on how to accelerate it or avoid slowing progress. And a messaging research process that engages core grantees every step of the way would provide a productive venue for ongoing strategy conversations grounded in research. The resulting research product would provide a productive starting point for a convening of stakeholders—both to share the research more broadly and discuss implications for messaging and outreach.

## INTERVIEWEES

We interviewed the following individuals:

- Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies
- Mimi Pickering, AppalShop
- Lisa Abbott, KFTC
- Justin Maxson, MACED
- Matt Wasson, Appalachian Voices
- Cathy Kunkel, Energy Efficient West Virginia
- Lora Smith, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
- Martin Richards, Community Farm Alliance
- Aaron Sutch, Mountain Institute - Energy Program Manager
- Christine Muehlman Gyovai, Institute for Environmental Negotiation at the Univ of Virginia
- Evan Hansen, Downstream Strategies
- Mary Anne Hitt & Mark Kresowik, Sierra Club
- Thomas M. Watson, Rural Support Partners
- Nancy Ailes & Kelly Watkinson, Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust
- Katey Lauer, Alliance for Appalachia
- Wayne Fawbush, formerly with the Ford Foundation
- Burt Lauderdale, KFTC

## MAPPING THE WORK

Our interviews included a wide variety of “transition” stakeholders, ranging from hyper-local groups, to state- or region-wide organizations, to national groups working in Appalachia. These groups encompass some—but not all—of the economic sectors that have been identified by the Appalachian Funders Network and others as offering important opportunities for economic transition in Central Appalachia. We talked to a number of individuals working broadly on community development or “entrepreneurship,” and to groups working on clean energy, energy efficiency, and local food systems. However, we have not interviewed anyone in the health care field, as this is not an issue where the blue moon fund is funding projects.

Given the variety of work these groups and individuals are involved in, it’s not surprising to see some differences in approach and philosophy. But there are also strong areas of agreement.

## GOALS

*“There are a lot of disparate groups that in essence want the same thing, but we need a cohesive strategy.”* – Aaron Sutch, Mountain Institute

At a 30,000 foot level, most of those interviewed share the same goal: Help central Appalachian people and communities. But beneath that overarching theme, goals quickly diverge into categories more reflective of individual organizational priorities.

Many groups cited goals around building broader, more diverse support for their issues, building cultural or community capacity, or changing political realities in Central Appalachia. For groups focused all or in part on clean energy, the goals are expanded use of renewable energy and energy efficiency, and improving the policies that promote clean energy. For those focused on food systems, of course, it’s all about food policy. For Appalachian Voices, it translates to “address[ing] the greatest environmental threats in the central Appalachian region,” or even more specifically, “stop mountaintop removal coal mining.”

And there are deep divides around messaging that could make it difficult or impossible to develop an overarching strategy or message platform focused to specifics. To find common ground, therefore, it will be crucial to stay at a high level, develop a vision of a better future for the region, and define success around improving opportunities and quality of life for the people of central Appalachia.

*“We’ve had this situation of intense poverty and no conversation that’s been productive in moving forward. I’ve really felt like there are some opportunities to reimagine where we are and part of that starts with recognition that what we’ve been doing is not working.”*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

## VISION

*“I don’t think the primary challenges are technical....the bigger challenges are political and cultural. How do we align people around a vision? ... We know we need these broader goals around the political and cultural challenges, but we don’t have them yet.”*

– Justin Maxson, MACED

Everyone we interviewed expressed clear, strong visions for a brighter future for Central Appalachia. While these visions vary in the details, many of them are remarkably similar in the shared values they reflect: Independence. Pride. Safety. Justice.

*“Folks in rural areas and in all of Appalachia are able to access economic opportunities that are going to feed them personally, that don’t beat them down. Jobs and an economy that continues to grow their community, not take everything from their communities. We should have a decent livelihood that doesn’t ruin our environment and the communities we care about. We should have a solid set of values around cooperation and support, because we’re all marching down a similar path.”*

– Thomas Watson, Rural Support Partners

*“The small towns around the region should be viable and driving. The people should have jobs that have decent pay, and are not based on inevitable environmental destruction.”*

– Evan Hansen, Downstream Strategies

*“Maintain [Appalachia’s] environmental health and rural characteristics while still increasing job opportunities and peoples’ bottom line.”*

– Kelly Watkinson, Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust

*“Healthy communities, willful economies, long-term jobs, jobs for your kids, meaningful jobs.”*

– Christine Muehlman Gyovai, Institute for Environmental Negotiation

*“Success would mean we’re not losing people – they’re staying in the region to build a future and raise their families.”*

– Mary Ann Hitt, Sierra Club

While there were definitely calls for developing a shared vision, there were also concerns about whether any vision that is inclusive enough to please all stakeholders would be too watered down to be meaningful.

*“The opportunity is not to do a namby pamby ‘we’re all in this together’ campaign, but a hard-charging campaign about the future, exposing obsolete politicians, bringing people together to fight for this future.”*

*There's not going to be that much coal investment in fighting this in the future. What's possible in a campaign is changing."*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

## **BARRIERS**

There was substantial agreement among those interviewed regarding the barriers that make it difficult to achieve these visions of success.

### ***Coal Industry and Politics***

By far the most commonly mentioned barriers were the coal industry and corrupt local politics, or a combination of the two: politicians who are beholden to the coal industry.

*"Obviously, you've got these powerful, wealthy, vested interests in the status quo: coal and energy companies trying to maximize their bottom lines in ways at odds to our goals. A lot of the other barriers follow from there: corruption of politics at local and state levels."*

– Matt Wasson, Appalachian Voices

*"The political culture that's a legacy to the coal industry in West Virginia. It's harder to be influential if you don't have the right political connections in West Virginia. Usually people in the coal industry have the right political connections."*

– Cathy Kunkel, Energy Efficient West Virginia

*"You've got a political class that is afraid to take on the industry. As long as we have this perception that 'coal is king public,' officials are afraid to take that on. It's going to take someone with some courage. That's a real roadblock, local TV stations that won't take coal companies on until politicians do."*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

*"Another barrier to success is the continuation of mountaintop removal mining and other practices. Until there's some certainty in the region about the future of coal mining, you'll still have some people thinking that if they could just get EPA to go back to rubber-stamping permits, coal would make a big resurgence. As long as that perception is still there, that's a real barrier."*

– Matt Wasson, Appalachian Voices

*"Local politicians will be last in line, will support the coal industry even after it's dead."*

– Justin Maxson, MACED

**Polarization**

The coal industry and politicians were also seen as contributing to – or causing – extensive polarization in conversations around coal and alternatives to coal. But that polarization has also been widened by some NGO efforts.

*“In the last five years, the coal industry has sunk a ton of resources into the ‘Friends of Coal’ campaign. They used to spend their propaganda money externally, not inside the region. But as our work on mountaintop removal mining gained traction, and as Obama came into office, they started devoting more of their PR machine locally.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

*“There’s been a good amount of activism in the last five or six years, efforts to bring in college students on spring and summer breaks, be front line shock troops to shut down mines, and it really polarized local people.”*

– Mimi Pickering, AppalShop

**Lack of options**

Some interviewees cited either a lack of economic alternatives and options; a lack of visibility of such options; or a lack of understanding of new technologies and options.

*“There’s a lack of specific alternatives that you can point to. People won’t oppose things that will create jobs and help low-income homeowners (EE retrofits, for example), but there’s such a dearth of good examples. Or maybe not so much a dearth as a perception of a lack of alternatives. Not enough visibility of what’s happening.”*

– Matt Wasson, Appalachian Voices

*“In terms of energy efficiency, there’s a real lack of understanding of what we’re even talking about.”*

– Cathy Kunkel, Energy Efficient West Virginia

*“There are some pieces of building a movement that we’ve just not done yet. Creating movement infrastructure – we need some plans that show what an alternative development plan looks like in the region.”*

– Justin Maxson, MACED

**Lack of capacity**

While there is a sense that there are great groups and individuals already doing great work in the region, there’s also general acknowledgement that it’s not enough, largely because there’s just not enough capacity to do more.

*“The communications pieces around transition are always something that gets pushed off of the table first due to capacity issues.”*

– Lora Smith, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

*“We’re always capacity challenged. There’s lots of interest in food systems, so our work is accelerating, and we need to build capacity to meet that demand.”*

– Martin Richards, Community Farm Alliance

*“For us, the biggest barrier is mainly capacity on the ground, within the nonprofit and governmental structures, even in traditional economic development structures. Resources, staff, expertise on these newish business models. The capacity to capture the opportunities that are already here!”*

– Thomas Watson, Rural Support Partners

That capacity challenge also extends to the lack of funding and political support for alternatives:

*“Just in Kentucky alone, the coal industry gets around \$100M a year in direct support, subsidies from the state. Imagine if we had just 20% of that invested in alternatives. It’s so hard to compare small scale alternatives that are under-resourced with the level of financial and political support the coal industry has gotten.”*

– Justin Maxson, MACED

### ***Lack of social capacity/Hopelessness***

Interviewees also expressed concern about the sense among many Appalachians that there’s nothing to be done – that no one can really make a difference, and nothing that’s been tried has helped the economic situation in the region.

*“When that next big thing never materializes, people lose hope.”*

– Lora Smith, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

*“There’s a sense of hopelessness, that nothing’s going to change due to lack of leadership. The drug problems are a symptom of that hopelessness.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

*“Finding ways to have the conversation and to have hope, that’s the challenge.”*

– Martin Richards, Community Farm Alliance

## OPPORTUNITIES

Despite all the challenges the interviewees identified, there's also a clear sense of hope – and a sense that things may be starting to change. Stakeholders identified a variety of opportunities, both conceptual and sectoral.

### **A moment for change**

An impressive number of those interviewed expressed a feeling that Central Appalachia is approaching, or may already be in, a moment where real change is possible. Stakeholders cited the ongoing decline of the coal industry as a major economic driver of this perceived shift, but also more recent hints of shifting sentiments around coal and transition among politicians and Appalachian residents.

*“There’s been a reluctance to acknowledge that the coal industry is leaving, but now there’s more and more public acknowledgement & acceptance. I don’t think there’s ever been a time with so much. You’ll see it in the media coverage, and the stuff the grassroots groups in the region have done.”*

– Lora Smith, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

*“There are these moments that happen, that are significant, as economies change. It can be a crisis, like a natural disaster or declining natural resources or changing policy. These are key turning points.”*

– Martin Richards, Community Farm Alliance

*“There’s a different sense in the air – we didn’t create it, we’re just nurturing it – that if things are going to get better, it’ll be because people working together, across lines of division. There’s a new determination to not wait for someone else to provide the solutions.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

*“There is growing recognition and acknowledgement that there’s a dramatic change going on, some thing or some things have to be done. That will loosen the grip of the coal industry.”*

– Mimi Pickering, AppalShop

*“It’s an opportunity for a campaign, real opportunity to do a strategic campaign, whenever people are feeling one way but official discourse is somewhere else. It’s a good moment.”*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

*“My sense is that people across Appalachia are talking more about what’s next for the region. There’s a sense that the writing is on the wall, we have to start thinking about what comes next.”*

– Mary Anne Hitt, Sierra Club

**Countering the influence of coal**

Given that coal is clearly the 800-pound gorilla in the coal conversation, we asked stakeholders for their thoughts on the best ways to counter the influence of coal, on the public narrative and on the politics of the region. We heard a variety of ideas, but not surprisingly, no silver bullets.

Some talked about the need to avoid the polarizing effect of conversations about coal, either by focusing the conversation on other economic sectors, or by avoiding mention coal entirely:

*“There’s an opportunity to connect with people around any number of environmental and economic development initiatives if we can avoid the polarization that comes with it being ‘all about coal’ .... I think it’s wide open. The industry tries to make it all about coal. If we could win that, we could gain a lot of traction.”*

– Matt Wasson, Appalachian Voices

*“With Making Connections, we’re trying to avoid getting entangled in that debate. We want to move beyond it and not talk about whether coal is good or bad, but show, here’s examples of other kinds of things we could do in the area.”*

– Mimi Pickering, AppalShop

*“If you don’t make the miners out to be villains, then you can get a lot of people to join.”*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

*“The decline of coal is creating an interesting opportunity and challenge for Appalachia. For so long, the political system has been dominated by the coal industry; workers have been trapped because this is the only industry. It has really pitted the working class against itself, created a ‘jobs vs. the economy’ dichotomy. Given that coal is inevitably declining, now there’s also an opportunity to figure out what we want the economy to look like.”*

– Cathy Kunkel, Energy Efficient West Virginia

Many interviewees touched on the need to counteract decades of corruption in regional politics:

*“So much of the challenge is that state politics that are coal-oriented get in the way of investments in alternatives. We need to have a conversation that recognizes the media isn’t, or can’t, or doesn’t talk about that part of the story.”*

– Justin Maxson, MACED

*“Cultural shift is very necessary. Politicians need to be given courage to speak truth to reality and feel as though they will not lose elections.”* – Mimi Pickering, AppalShop

*“Elected officials in the state talk to their constituents about the fact that the world is going to move Beyond Coal and Appalachia needs to be in front of the next wave of economic development and diversification.”*

– Mary Ann Hitt, Sierra Club

*“I think there’s an opportunity to expose some of the failures of the industry and of local leaders to provide or support any positive solutions. An opportunity to realign people’s sense of who their friends are.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

*“State elected officials. They’re beholden to old industries, would rather defend them at all costs, even if it means dividing people. They’d rather go down with the ship and say they’re protecting the coal industry.”*

– Evan Hansen, Downstream Strategies

*“The political leadership in Eastern KY has become much more religiously conservative, and the coal industry have formed this powerful merger between right-wing religious issues and a pro-coal agenda. So the other force is the religious leaders in the counties.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

### ***New/growing sectors***

From food to energy, big businesses to small, we heard about a variety of ways that Central Appalachians are already starting to diversify the region’s economy. But most of them need much more development and expansion to make a sizable economic difference.

#### Food:

- *“Food is one of the areas that can connect people and bring them together. For example, taking a look at traditional food ways, how do people celebrate the region? What seeds can only be found here?”* – Christine Muehlman Gyovai, Institute for Environmental Negotiation
- *“We know there’s demand for both physical (farmers markets) and economic markets. Big picture, we need to develop a system of aggregation and distribution of local foods, to schools, hospitals, etc.”* – Martin Richards, Community Farm Alliance

#### Energy:

- *“With municipalities, they always have a budget shortfall. If we can bring in a solar project that puts local people to work and enhances infrastructure and saves the city money on electricity....With solar, we have a great marketing piece.”* – Aaron Sutch, Mountain Institute

- *“West Virginia is ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in the country in energy efficiency, which means there’s tremendous room for improvement.” – Cathy Kunkel, Energy Efficient West Virginia*
- *“This is a huge opportunity for one of the least energy efficient regions of the country. [We can] start creating some new industries in this region where coal has been the only thing. [It] could also help struggling low-income homeowners to have a more sustainable energy situation in their homes – around their energy bills and their quality of life.” – Matt Wasson, Appalachian Voices*

#### Entrepreneurs/business:

- *“I think there is an opportunity around traditional industries and manufacturing sectors. There’s a lot of energy around what’s new, but there are traditional industries, like furniture and textiles, that need some attention. How could we help Vaughan Bassett capture more business, and how would that translate into more jobs? I know there’s a furniture manufacturing association, but it’s probably old-fashioned. How do we help these older industries get more innovative and reach new markets?” – Thomas Watson, Rural Support Partners*
- *“I don’t think you lead with investing in renewables. I think you lead with investing in growing entrepreneurs, and one of the opportunities they have is in renewables. I think we have to figure out how to talk about slow, expensive and ugly strategies, like build technical assistance, training and financing pipelines to create more entrepreneurs, because that’s what it’s going to take.” – Justin Maxson, MACED*
- *“We need big business, major corporations. One thing we have, at least right now, is cheap energy. There are people promoting that to big, energy intensive industries.” – Evan Hansen, Downstream Strategies*
- *“Textiles are coming back from China, social impact is driving desire for locally produced products. ‘Made in the USA’ is a great seller. In Morgantown, 2-3 textile shops were doing small business, and now they’re getting more business than they can handle.... Locally owned companies like Vaughan Bassett feel they have a commitment to their workers and the town. That’s a story, that’s a selling point for marketing themselves. ... Many factories in Galax closed – the locally owned ones stayed open, the others closed. That’s a reason in itself to move to locally owned economy. That’s the future we want to create.” – Thomas Watson, Rural Support Partners*

#### Restoration/Environmental Protection:

- *“I’ve worked in Virginia, Maryland, DC, and the tie to and respect for the land that would lead someone to do a permanent [conservation easement] agreement is really strong here. ... We have an opportunity to protect the watershed while it’s still healthy, rather than spending a ton on restoration once it’s destroyed.” – Kelly Watkinson, Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust*
- *“One of the ideas that’s talked about is a restoration economy. We have all of this destroyed land. The federal government could make a restoration investment that could put people to work. The guys getting laid off have those skills already; that could be a way to make that transition.” – Mimi Pickering, AppalShop*

## MESSAGING

*“I think the goal would be to look for inclusive language that just about anyone could find themselves in, including folks in the coal industry who realize we need to think about other kinds of energy.”*

– Thomas Watson, Rural Support Partners

Despite the strong areas of agreement regarding the challenges and even the opportunities, our interviews indicate that people working in the region have a variety of opinions regarding specific messages. Views about what comprises the “right” message on Appalachian transition differ considerably, and appear to be based more on anecdotal evidence and “gut instinct” than on research. There was broad agreement that additional message testing would be very helpful.

### *Transition*

We asked specifically for input on what language people use to discuss work that we would loosely term as “Appalachian transition,” whether that be promoting economic transition and diversification, or advancing one of the individual sectors seen as offering transition opportunities. The biggest area of disagreement we found is around this messaging – whether to use words like “transition” or not; whether to make reference to the history of coal in the region, or not.

*“We’ve invested a lot in thinking through frame & messaging, especially around ‘New Power’ and Appalachian transition, but a lot of what we have developed has come out of the focus group that is our work, but hasn’t had a lot of rigorous field testing.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

Stakeholders recognized that the term transition is going to mean different things to different people. For some who can’t envision any other way of life beyond coal, “transition” may sound very frightening. But for the base—for those who are working to diversify Appalachia’s economic and cultural structure—“transition” is a code word for a different vision of Appalachia’s future.

*“Transition is a euphemism, just like ‘choice’ is a euphemism for abortion. People use transition for job loss, divorce, etc. It’s an easy way to talk about the end of coal without picking a fight. When you pick a euphemism like this, you are doing it because you want to disguise the subject. So Appalachian transition or coal transition or whatever, is just basically a euphemism that’s a kind of peaceable way to get the conversation started and reach out to the choir. People who already engaged in the subject know what you mean.”*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

*“I came away from the [Appalachia’s Bright Future] conference with a couple of things really being needed. One: how do we frame this thing we call transition? It’s really scary to some people....at the*

*conference I was thinking, what is the vision? You don't want to impose a vision on people... We need to acknowledge the fear, of a way of life that is drastically changing."*

– Christine Muehlman Gyovai, Institute for Environmental Negotiation

Some stakeholders spoke out strongly in favor of a “transition” frame, acknowledging that it requires including coal in the conversation:

*“Transition is a great umbrella that works for lots of people. I've been surprised that there's been really good uptake of the term. Some think of it as extractive to sustainable, some think of it as reversing the economic downturn. I find it's a great frame. Haven't found any pushback – everyone gets it, it makes sense to people. It's the best term we've found to get us all on the same page.”*

– Thomas Watson, Rural Support Partners

*“We do talk about it as transition. Some people prefer diversification, they feel transition immediately threatens people in the coal industry.... My observation: it doesn't really matter what you say. The coal industry is so reactionary right now, they will oppose anything you do no matter what you call it.”*

– Evan Hansen, Downstream Strategies

*“Yes, we should talk about coal. Yes, we have to talk about coal. It's kind of like talking about climate – if we don't, we'll wake up four years later and wish we had talked about it. We don't have the option to not talk about coal. We can find better ways to do it, better ways to lead into the conversation like ‘Appalachia's bright future.’ ... At some point within it, there has to be an acknowledgement of the role coal continues to play in shutting down political and economic realities.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

Other stakeholders argued just as strongly for excluding mentions of transition, or avoiding mentions of coal, which some believe precludes using a “transition” frame:

*“I talk about building an economy that works for the people of West Virginia. I also talk about self-reliance and locally-based economies....I tend to not talk explicitly about ‘economic transition’ because I feel as though—and I may be wrong—people hear ‘transition away from coal,’ rather than transitioning toward something that might be better.”*

– Cathy Kunkel, Energy Efficient West Virginia

*“We never bring up coal, and we never introduce our projects as being part of the transition. We just talk brass tacks about the particulars of the project.”*

– Aaron Sutch, Mountain Institute

*“Don’t talk about transition, talk about buying food and shirts and furniture from your own communities. As your restaurant where their food comes from. Ask Walmart why they aren’t buying local shirts. We’ve always been able to grow local food; there just wasn’t this big demand. Now there is.”*

– Thomas Watson, Rural Support Partners

*“Food is not controversial. Everybody eats. We’re finding in coalfield communities, people can come to the table literally and figuratively around food and start a conversation around economics.”*

– Martin Richards, Community Farm Alliance

Yet even those who try to avoid talking about coal are finding that it’s not always possible, or helpful, to do so:

*“We don’t go out of our way to be anti-coal, we don’t say energy efficiency should replace coal, because it’s not helpful. We don’t even say energy efficiency is helping to transition away from coal....But we’re finding coal is impossible to ignore. For the last two years, the coal industry has single-handedly killed our proposals in the legislature. They argue energy efficiency will kill mining jobs.”*

– Cathy Kunkel, Energy Efficient West Virginia

*“You can’t go around coal because it’s so much a part of the community and who people are, but if you look...some of the stuff happening in southwest Virginia, they acknowledge heritage of coal and then quickly move on, and you see some proactive stuff moving forward there. They just don’t get too stuck on it. What I would say is that you can look into more of the history and heritage of self-sufficiency, but you can’t do that and not acknowledge coal. It’s such a huge history and narrative. You can’t just side-step it.”* – Lora Smith, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

### ***Keep it simple***

Regardless of whether groups do or don’t use a “transition” frame, stakeholders recognize the need to adapt their language to their audiences.

*“For somebody who isn’t yet engaged, it can be overwhelming. If you talk about keeping the river clean enough so they can fish in it, that’s language they’ll understand.”*

– Christine Muehlman Gyovai, Institute for Environmental Negotiation

*“Nobody in the coal industry is using ‘transition;’ it’s really just being used by folks in the nonprofit sector to talk about what they want to have happen. ... It’s a narrowing of the discussion. You can define transition so people understand what you’re talking about, or can use the term to just keep certain people in. It’s a strategic decision.”*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

### ***Pick your messengers***

As with all communications, the stakeholders we interviewed recognize that the messenger is just as important as the message.

*“What’s most important is finding the local person who is a well-respected landowner and has put a conservation easement on their property, and get them to knock on their neighbors’ doors. ... It’s neighbors talking to neighbors.”*

– Kelly Watkinson, Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust

*“What’s most effective is one-on-one communications, getting our members in touch with others. ... The state looks to us because we have the ability to reach across voices that have traditionally been siloed.”*

– Martin Richards, Community Farm Alliance

*“What we’re trying to do is tell stories about better examples of people from in-region modeling possibilities for a different kind of economy in the region. ... Have the folks delivering those messages be people from in the region, who resonate well with people in the area.”*

– Mimi Pickering, AppalShop

*“In Kentucky, there’s a movement for community foundations and locally controlled philanthropy. We’re about to see the largest transfer of generational wealth we’ve ever seen as the baby boomer generation dies – that’s one of the reasons these community foundations get set up, to keep wealth within these communities. These foundations can also have a different conversation outside the polarizing jobs vs. environment. We can talk about vision for communities via community foundations, which are seen as more neutral, not wrapped up in a coal versus not-coal narrative.”*

– Lora Smith, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

### ***Building Trust***

A number of those interviewed acknowledged a need to build trust among local communities – something that’s particularly difficult for groups coming in from outside, or seen as opposing coal as an economic driver.

*“You have to come across as an honest broker. That’s the hardest thing for the nonprofits to embrace. We don’t want to let the other guy get his shot. We end up limiting our impact because we’re mistrustful of the people we are trying to influence. Part of where we need to go is in really creating an environment for honest discourse.”*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

*“Part of it is getting folks to listen. A lot of people just shut down when the message comes from some places, like with KFTC or Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, Southern Appalachian Mountain*

*Stewards. They are fighting mountaintop removal, also fighting for just transition and economy, but they have been made into the enemy. When they speak, a lot of times people will turn that off. That's a difficult thing to get past."*

– Mimi Pickering, AppalShop

*"You need to pay respect to the good ideas locally, support those – but you cannot ignore the fact that there's all sorts of good things happening elsewhere. Not bad ideas because they're from outsiders. Part of the role we play is bringing in those ideas."*

– Evan Hansen, Downstream Strategies

*"Legitimacy and trust are critical. It was important early on to let folks know we didn't have an agenda that we're driving – we're wanting to complement efforts, if we're not helpful we'll move on. That helped build trust."*

– Christine Muehlman Gyovai, Institute for Environmental Negotiation

*"We have to come across as even-keeled as possible. In Appalachia, as someone new to the area, if anything most West Virginians are very civic, modest people. And if you come in loud and obnoxious you are not going to do as much good as if you sit down with the good old boys and talk."*

– Aaron Sutch, Mountain Institute

*"Appalachians can be distrustful of outsiders, especially government, but that can change with face to face interaction and a lot of listening. Community organizing is the heart and soul of what it takes to make that happen."*

– Martin Richards, Community Farm Alliance

### ***Local Control/Empowerment***

The need to talk about solutions as locally-grown, aimed at empowering local people and communities, came through in many of the interviews.

*"All of these people have had to get by with less, they've had to do that for everything. From fixing washing machines to making schools work. I think we have to come to a place where we are empowering local people and respecting them to come up with the solution, not being told what the solution is.... We need a cultural conversation that's local people being part of moving things ahead, and it can't seem too slick or packaged; it can't be culturally inappropriate."*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

*"We emphasize that solar and energy efficiency creates work, mitigates against rising energy costs, and empowers local communities to be self-sufficient."*

– Cathy Kunkel, Energy Efficient West Virginia

*“Appalachia is a place of paradox: that’s one of those places where you see that paradox very much highlighted. There’s a general sense of hopelessness, that voting doesn’t matter, so there are low levels of civic engagement. But nationally it’s seen as a model of organizing for communities and justice. The labor movement was born there. Two parallel tracks running through region. There are competing narratives: the narrative of hopelessness and entrenched poverty, and the narrative of all of the opportunity and building on all of the great organizing work that’s been done since the turn of the century.”*

– Lora Smith, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

## TACTICS

*“How do you work in a way that really empowers people on the ground and leaves them with something at the end of the day?”*

– Wayne Fawbish, formerly with the Ford Foundation

Given the stubborn barriers facing the region – the stranglehold of the coal industry, the corrupt political system, a pervasive sense of hopelessness – it’s no surprise that stakeholders are struggling to find solutions that match the scale of the problems. Again, we found some areas of agreement, such as the need to tell positive stories about what’s already working, and some disagreements about the best kinds of campaigns to create change.

### *Success stories*

There was virtually universal agreement that one important part of countering the narrative that coal is king, combatting a sense of hopelessness, and persuading decisionmakers to act, is to tell stories about what’s happening on the ground already.

*“Having concrete examples in WV is really helpful in talking to legislatures.”*

– Cathy Kunkel, Energy Efficient West Virginia

*“Showing how much money could actually be generated through outdoor recreation – it might contribute more than coal, according to National Outdoor Industry and West Virginia Coal Association numbers. ... What’s really possible, why somebody should invest in business incubation for outfitters, for example.”*

– Christine Muehlman Gyovai, Institute for Environmental Negotiation

*“People just need to learn about what’s going on out there. You need to be able to communicate it. The Morgantown project is a good example. We were trying to donate a solar PV system to the town, to show some successes, there was a lot of resistance to accepting a donation. Wouldn’t be true in other states where solar is being promoted.”*

– Evan Hansen, Downstream Strategies

*“The big opportunity is to create more positive examples, and highlight the ones that exist. ... Something coming in that is creating an economic solution, creating actual jobs – even if not as many as are being lost in the coal industry. Even a few jobs could have impact on people’s perceptions because people are so desperate for economic solutions.”*

– Matt Wasson, Appalachian Voices

Some of these efforts are already underway. The “Making Connections” project by AppalShop is one important source of “success stories,” though we learned that their stories don’t yet have quite the reach they would like:

*“Continuing to get the message and the messenger right is something we always have to keep in mind, and then finding places where the conversations are going on. One of the great things about WMMT is the diverse audience, a lot of lower income residents, and we’re continuing to figure out where people are getting their information, how they are getting it, how can we get our message into those systems.”*

– Mimi Pickering, AppalShop

The Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust is preparing to publish a book about the stories of landowners who have translated their love of the watershed and their lands into conservation easements aimed at safeguarding the region’s rural character:

*“It’s called ‘Listening to the Land: Stories from the Cacapon & Lost River Valley,’ and it will tell these stories in a way that will be compelling to people in other locations around the region. I think Appalachia needs books that are inspiring and show people with teeth who aren’t depressed. Most books/stories are sad, poverty, depression. This book will show that there is something really valuable here.”*

– Nancy Ailes, Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust

But there’s also a sense that groups need to do more to reinforce that all of these stories are part of the same overarching narrative: a narrative about how to envision and create a better future for Central Appalachia.

*“If we can become more systematic about producing more stories, amplifying each other more, developing more communications tools that amplify this conversation – then maybe the local foods folks could see themselves as part of the conversation. Most of the concerns about transition are fears about the consequences.”*

– Burt Lauderdale, KFTC

And there are questions about which is more important: making existing examples more visible, or creating more examples of success.

*“Is the smartest thing to focus on pushing stories of existing examples out? Or is it trying to help raise up – through media, social media – the need for investment in these alternatives so the scale question can be answered? Or is it both? They’re pretty different approaches. I just think there aren’t enough examples. Eighty percent of our work is to try to create more examples, but we need to lift up the examples there are, and shine light on the need for more investment.”*

– Justin Maxson, MACED

### **Funding**

One means of addressing the “capacity” challenges would be to find and leverage additional sources of funding. From the community foundations touted by the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation to the appropriate redistribution of the coal severance tax, this theme arose repeatedly.

*“ARC has around \$70 million a year to play with across all of the states and regions considered Appalachia. There’s an opportunity to help focus the agency’s efforts on some of the sectors and strategies explored at the Bright Future conference.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

*“We need to make sure ARC and others aren’t spending that money on coal.”*

– Mark Kresowik, Sierra Club

*“The severance tax is a tremendous opportunity to create more stable long-term funding to support the region.”*

– Christine Muehlman Gyovai, Institute for Environmental Negotiation

*“Why does most of the wealth in the coal industry flow out of state? Coal-rich counties have poorest schools and the highest property taxes. There’s potential for organizing around economic justice in West Virginia in a way that might bring in more of the working class, be more palatable to their concerns.”*

– Cathy Kunkel, Energy Efficient West Virginia

Even foundations may—inadvertently—be part of the problem, by encouraging competition over collaboration:

*“My beef with philanthropy is that the nature of giving is not to find a common solution, it’s to bet on the guy that’ll come up with the shiniest example, the coolest report. They’re not intending to set up competition among the groups, but it kind of does because everyone is shooting for those same funds and when you get them you have to show off. Instead of having a united kickass approach to oppose what industry has done, you have little competing messages and groups who want to shine the brightest.”*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

***Local vs. regional/national***

While the interviews demonstrate many areas of agreement, we found some interesting points of divergence and tension. Most stakeholders emphasize the need to ground any movement or campaign at the local level, but others suggest that pressure from outside – whether from activists, politicians or even market forces – will be crucial to turning the tide in Central Appalachia.

*“We’ve found that people on the ground are smart, they know their communities better than outsiders. They know what’s there, the assets. They may not know what they can do with the assets, that’s where you rely on experts.”*

– Martin Richards, Community Farm Alliance

*“We have to build a movement at the local level. Like the civil rights movement on the ground – created a national conversation, forced regional dialogue about a cultural change. Skipped over local officials. We have to figure out how to skip over the locals and create pressure from the outside. But the strategy isn’t clear enough yet.”*

– Justin Maxson, MACED

*“Entrepreneurs just don’t open businesses where the water looks like tomato soup, smells like rotten eggs, and life expectancy is five years shorter than the national average. We can’t ignore the far-reaching impacts of mountaintop removal mining as long as there’s this uncertainty. It keeps us from getting decisionmakers to focus on anything else. We’re really getting close; there is a real opportunity to end this at the national level during Obama’s second term. But it’s not going to happen if we all shift our focus elsewhere.”*

– Matt Wasson, Appalachian Voice

*“The movement to close down coal fired power plants and limit fossil fuels is picking up speed, particularly on college campuses. All of that is good, but at the same time if there’s a way to build in more understanding particularly among young people outside the region of the economic impact in the region, this notion of remediation and restoration and a national commitment to rebuild a region that’s been our energy sacrifice zone. That’s what we’re going to need to build support for investment in the region. We’re going to have to have people and institutions and foundations outside of the region willing to invest as much inside.”*

– Mimi Pickering, AppalShop

***Target Audiences***

Everyone agrees local officials are important – they are politically powerful in their own communities, and state politicians follow their lead when it comes to any number of issues. Yet, while many think they

are a lost cause (as Justin Maxson noted, “Local politicians will be the last in line: they will support the coal industry after is dead”), others peg them as an audience worth pursuing:

*“I think the real potential is with local government. County judges and magistrates are facing huge losses in revenue, so they will be among the first to want to work with others who are talking about other options. They may be more practical about moving forward even if they don’t agree with everything we support.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

Providing concrete ideas that local officials (and the public) can adopt as their own is seen as one possible way of effecting change in the political landscape.

*“We have such a dearth of candidates running on anything but ‘more for coal than that guy.’ We need to put a handful of simple, easily digestible ideas in the hands of voters and candidates.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

*“We need some big ideas that are aspirational but there’s enough under them that there’s a shot for them to work.”*

– Justin Maxson, MACED

Women and youth were mentioned repeatedly as top potential targets for outreach:

*“One of the cool things regarding these [successful] campaigns is it’s women, from when they get their cell phone until they are grandmothers who are using Facebook, and so anybody who’s ever succeeded at doing anything knows women are going to do the work. In a way you can create a conversation that appeals more to women, because most of these campaigns and conversations don’t. They are more about tough guy stuff. There’s a real opportunity to plan and roll out a woman-to-woman campaign.”*

– Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

*“Women as a voting block are a huge, untapped resource. If you message with women, that changes the whole frame. With coal miners, you are immediately entrenched in the coal frame. With women you can sidestep the conversation.”*

– Lora Smith, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

*“We sat down with a VP of Walmart recently – they’re looking 25 years out with their strategies. ...And they realize they have an image problem. They’re working to change that with local investments, commitment to women, the shoppers of the family, and they have an initiative for women farmers. It’s all self-interested, but it’s also an opportunity for us to take advantage of.”*

– Thomas Watson, Rural Support Partners

*“Youth development groups are a huge audience that can help move transition.”*

– Lora Smith, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

*“I also think that West Virginia should be thought of as this super cool place, not just to retire, but to go to work. Young people need to want to be here.”*

– Evan Hansen, Downstream Strategies

*“We’re trying to grow out, targeting young people via social media channels around Appalachian renewal.”*

– Justin Maxson, MACED

*“We are clear about brain drain, population losses – those things are significant. At the same time, there are a growing number of talented, innovative young people choosing to stay and help propel good things happening in local communities.”*

– Lisa Abbott, KFTC

## WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

While there’s significant agreement among stakeholders about the challenges, there is no unifying vision for a solution or set of solutions that matches the scale of those challenges. As Justin Maxson put it, *“The reason there’s so much media about coal is because it still equals 5,700 jobs. There’s no alternative that can replace those jobs in even three times the time in which they were lost. It’s a massive transition.”*

And while there is some appetite for developing unifying goals and messages, there’s also recognition that organizations may have their own unique roles to play. In fact, better understanding of the landscape of work that’s already happening, and how different groups inhabit that landscape, may be one of the most useful outcomes of this project.

*“I just think that there’s a lot of different organizations coming at this with different goals and agendas. KFTC has a very public goal of ending MTR, and it’s good to have them doing that. That’s one end of the spectrum. MACED on the other end, they’re not talking about that, they’re talking about economic development. We’re trying to figure out that whole map of activity from the advocates and nonprofits in the region.”*

– Mimi Pickering, AppalShop

*“You can’t have an Appalachian renewal campaign. This work will be decades long, with multiple audiences and strategies. ... The solutions are complex and will take a lot of time to roll out. But we know so much more about what needs to happen than anyone gives us credit for. The question is how do we grow it up to a scale that makes a difference.”*

– Justin Maxson, MACED

We also asked specifically what stakeholders would find most useful going forward, and there was general agreement that a strategic conversation around communications—ideally at a convening focused on this topic—would be very constructive. Additional public opinion research testing specific transition themes and language also rose to the top, and a strategic communications convening could potentially help develop messages and themes to be included in additional research. Finally, some stakeholders expressed a desire for concrete recommendations about how to better communicate and collaborate with each other, and promote each other’s work where appropriate.

But as outlined in the Top Level Findings section above, Resource Media sees a need for deeper research into the messages and tactics that are most effective with specific audiences. Without that research, all of these smart, well-intentioned transition stakeholders are still operating very much in the dark about the best path(s) forward.