

Appalachia Transition

Media and Digital Audit V.1.0

BACKGROUND

Central Appalachia is in a time of transition. Coal has dominated the economic and political landscape in the region for decades, but production is in decline and will continue to be phased out as market demand shifts. Local communities, long reliant on the industry for jobs, are struggling to find a sustainable way forward, and poverty continues to be widespread.

With all of this in mind, Resource Media conducted an analysis of media coverage of the region's ongoing transition away from coal, the social and economic aspects of the transition, and the perception of post-coal alternatives. We looked at how the conversation is framed online, where both pro- and anti-coal bias exists in the media and where there is room to tell new stories about transition.

METHODOLOGY

Resource Media used [Sysomos Media Analysis Platform](#) and [Lexis Nexis](#) to capture and analyze media coverage on the transition. Given that many residents identify more with state or local geographies than the concept of Central Appalachia, we looked at both region-wide and state-specific coverage. The states we focused on included Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee and North Carolina. We understand that ARC's definition of Central Appalachia is county-based, and tried to focus on the Central Appalachian counties by using directional qualifiers like Eastern Kentucky and Central West Virginia.

We tried a number of different queries to refine our search parameters. Looking for content containing any transition-type keywords (transition, economic development, reclamation, diversification, etc.) returned thousands of irrelevant results, so we narrowed the search with keywords related to economic sectors like agriculture, forestry and energy.

We settled on the following basic query, which we paired with various geographic terms: (coal OR mining OR forestry OR biomass OR biofuel OR "natural gas" OR "clean energy" OR "renewable energy" OR "local food" OR "sustainable agriculture" OR tourism) AND (transition OR "economic development" OR "community development" OR "economic diversity" OR

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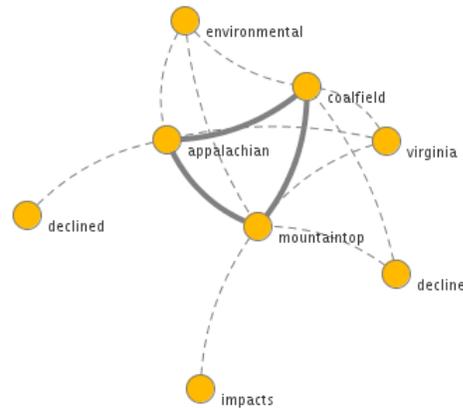
MEDIA AND DIGITAL AUDIT

"bright future" OR redevelopment OR renewal)¹. For the period between May 15, 2012 and May 15, 2013, this query produced 3,224 news mentions, 607 blog posts and 213 forum posts for Appalachia, and 659 news stories and 75 blog posts for Central Appalachia. By contrast, naming the states within Central Appalachia with the same query returned 25,639 news stories and 4,783 blog posts. We used automated text analysis tools to draw conclusions about trends in coverage across the region, but focused our research on data pulled from state specific searches and detailed queries about individual sectors.

For Twitter, we tried a number of different queries with shorter terms, and settled on three different versions detailed on pages 11-14. As with our news and blog research, we refined the query as we went to pick up content about news events occurring during the study period, or to follow key conversations.

GENERAL FINDINGS

We found a huge volume of coverage across a variety of media about the ongoing decline of coal in Central Appalachia and the impacts on local communities—everything from [services being cut due to reduced severance taxes](#) to [cultural shifts resulting from the need for coal miner's wives to seek work](#). The “buzz graph” to the right shows the words appearing most frequently in transition stories² within Central Appalachia. Words connected by bold, solid lines appear frequently in the same story, and those connected by dotted lines are less frequently linked. The chart illustrates the focus on coal's decline, with solution stories notably absent from the core narrative.



The lion's share of the coverage we looked at could be best characterized as handwringing over the demise of coal. The social and economic ramifications of shuttered coal plants are explored in detail, and the overwhelming impression is a sense of hopelessness and despair.

We also found a strong focus on politicized conversations about the role of regulations—whether in contributing to the demise of coal, or the appropriate role of government in encouraging renewables or regulating natural gas development and fracking.

¹ We originally included the term “wood products” in our query, but found it turned up too many irrelevant results, and that most relevant articles included the terms forestry, biofuel or biomass.

² We use the term “transition stories” to broadly refer to articles pulled via the search queries described above.

STATE-SPECIFIC FINDINGS

Blue moon fund and its grantees will not be surprised to hear that the details of the transition conversation vary by area. However, handwringing over the decline of coal still makes up the majority of coverage, whether in local newspapers, regional outlets, or the Twittersphere. We found dozens of stories like [this one about McDowell County West Virginia](#) chronicling the deterioration of coal towns. Many talked about how deeply coal is woven into their communities, from the importance of miners as a customer base for local business, to the reliance of local government on severance taxes.

Regulation was also a topic that spanned state and county lines. The phrase “war on coal”—or the hashtag #waroncoal—appeared in 2,963 news stories, 1321 blog posts, and 3,791 tweets in the states of Central Appalachia during our study period. Mostly, it was described as “Obama’s war on coal,” and referred to federal rules and EPA activities. However, there were also dozens of stories about state measures like fracking permitting laws, renewable energy requirements, and pollution standards.

Despite concerns over the impact of environmental regulations, most coverage we reviewed acknowledged that a changing market and dwindling supply mean coal is on its way out regardless of regulatory activity (although regulations may hasten its demise by making it more expensive to mine). Many news article and blog posts mentioned the need to invest in education, diversify the economy, and build resilience. However, most noted that coal miners earn high salaries and will have trouble finding comparable jobs in other sectors. While government investments have driven growth in sectors like agriculture, forestry and tourism, the stories about these developments rarely describe them as viable replacements for the coal industry.

In the state sections below, we focused on key coverage themes, variations on the regional narrative, and specific developments in the energy, forestry, agriculture or tourism sectors. The sheer volume of coverage (thousands of news articles and blog posts per state) made it impossible to read all the content, so we relied on a combination of automated text analysis and more in-depth review of key outlets or storylines.

A note about methodology: we started with the basic query on page two for each state, and then searched further for content about clean energy, biomass, forestry, food and agriculture, and tourism. When our research turned up news of developments, lawsuits, or other noteworthy events and initiatives, we dug deeper to find related coverage. We did not constrain any of our state searches using the term “Central Appalachia” or “Appalachia,” and also conducted searches without the transition qualifiers, using more general terms like “jobs” and “economy” to focus the results.

Virginia

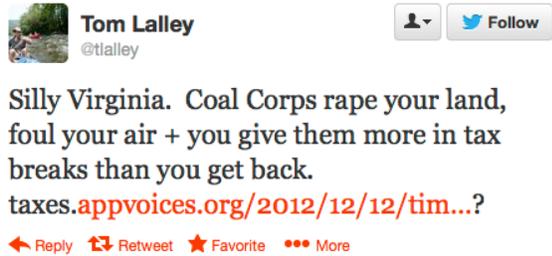
The big transition stories in southwest Virginia are about the [market forces](#) driving coal’s decline and energy politics. Coal was a huge issue for Southwest Virginia during election time, and we found countless articles about Obama and Romney’s respective positions, as well as the [race for Virginia’s 9th district](#) in the House of Representatives. As in other states, we found dozens of blog posts, opinion articles, and news stories about [the plight of mining families](#) and local business.

We found several stories highlighting government investment in agriculture and forestry and the rapid growth of these industries. In a [May 2013 press release](#) about the Agriculture and Forestry Initiatives Development Fund Planning Grant, Governor McDonnell said, "We've had great success incorporating two of the Commonwealth's largest industries, agriculture and forestry, and their significant overall impact on our economy into our economic development agenda."

Whitney Bonham of Virginia Tech suggested in a [December 2012 op-ed](#) in the *Roanoke Times* that Southwest Virginia should learn from places like Southside Virginia, and focus on diversification before it’s too late. She touted the region’s “breathtaking terrain” as an asset. Other stories, like [this editorial in the Bluefield Daily Telegraph](#), spoke of tremendous potential for local tourism.

“And the sky could be the limit when it comes to tourism growth in Southwest Virginia in the coming years. Factor in the new multi-county Spearhead Trails project, and a possible connector system between the Spearhead Trails near Pocahontas and the existing Hatfield-McCoy Trails in Bramwell, and the growth potential could be further amplified.”

While many newspaper stories talked about coal’s value to Southwest Virginia, a [December 2012 Downstream Strategies report](#) contended that the industry actually costs the state millions of dollars. The report was covered twice in Appalachian Voices’ blog (they were one of the funders), and once in [August Free Press](#), but generated no other media coverage that we could find. It did, however, get some Twitter action, including the tweet to the right.



Tom Lalley
@tlalley

Silly Virginia. Coal Corps rape your land, foul your air + you give them more in tax breaks than you get back.
taxes.appvoices.org/2012/12/12/tim...?

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We found little mention of natural gas in Southwest Virginia, and wind and solar energy were also largely absent from the content we reviewed. However, we did find some discussion of a [landfill methane project in Tazewell County](#).

West Virginia

In Southern West Virginia, as elsewhere in our study, problem stories tended to focus on the importance of the industry for [tax revenues](#), the [loss of mining jobs](#), and [impact on families](#). But, the opportunity for laid-off miners to get training generated some hopeful stories like [this one on WYMT TV](#) and [this one in the Register Herald](#).

There were three developments in West Virginia that brought health impacts of mining to the fore: news about a [law that regulates the amount of selenium](#) that can be discharged into waterways; the U.S. Court of Appeals [upholding the EPA's veto](#) of the Spruce Mine; and an [industry-funded study](#) designed to refute earlier science linking mountaintop removal mining to chronic health problems found in the region.

In terms of community and economic development, we found numerous stories about the potential of tourism to support local economies, and on the Hatfield McCoy Trail specifically. The Hatfield McCoy trail was [described in the Williamson Daily News](#) as “a statutory corporation created by the West Virginia Legislature to generate economic development through tourism in nine southern West Virginia counties.”

While high unemployment was described as a statewide or regional problem, many stories we found acknowledged the need for small scale local solutions, as in [this editorial](#) from the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*. The *Daily Telegraph* had called out the Hatfield McCoy trail in an [earlier editorial](#) anticipating an economic boost from ATV riders and boy scouts drawn by the trail.

We found little discussion of renewable energy developments in West Virginia, aside from [one hydropower plant in Fayette County](#), and the efforts of [Sustainable Williamson](#), a group working to promote clean energy in the heart of coal country. Another group—Coal River Mountain Watch—proposed wind energy development as an alternative to ongoing coal mining on Coal River Mountain, but the story was only covered on [Mother Earth News](#).

The West Virginia Gazette is the state's most prolific outlet on the topic of energy and economic transition, with Ken Ward Jr. covering the issue almost daily. He often pokes holes at pro-coal rhetoric, as in this [post in his Coal Tattoo blog](#), rebutting claims from West Virginia University engineering professor Syd Peng idea that renewables and energy efficiency cannot solve the region's problems.

North Carolina

Much of the energy narrative in North Carolina focuses on the state’s Renewable Energy Standard and the potential for natural gas development through fracking.

Efforts to repeal the Renewable Energy Standard (RES) generated coverage across different media, from [Business North Carolina](#) to the [Asheville Citizen Times](#) and the blogs of green groups like NRDC, Environmental Defense Fund, and Greenpeace. The issue was covered frequently by Think Progress, which produced [this graphic](#) that got major traction on Twitter.

Most mainstream media stories on the topic were factual, focusing on progress of a bill to repeal the RES, and quoted spokespeople on both sides. Those working to end the renewables requirement suggested clean energy companies could not compete without government subsidies, and that the law made the state less business-friendly. Representative Mike Hager said in the [News & Observer in March 2013](#), “I don’t think you should be subsidizing businesses into longevity. I’ve had one or two tell me they’ll never get off subsidies. I’ll pay for them, my children will pay for them and my grandchildren will pay for them.”

Supporters of renewable energy note that the state’s electricity is a regulated monopoly, and cite the potential of the renewables economy to create jobs. In an Associated Press [article](#), Senator Josh Stein said, “Why we would try to destroy one of the few sectors that have actually grown over the last recession is beyond me.”

While the solar industry is growing fast in North Carolina (indeed the state is now the 5th in the nation in solar production), few media outlets are talking about its growth. The North Carolina Sustainable Energy Coalition [released a report](#) in February 2013 touting the state’s progress in development renewables and addressing allegations that ratepayers are footing the bill. It received virtually no pick-up outside of progressive energy focused outlets like [Clean Technica](#). In fact, a rebuttal of the report’s job claims received more coverage (see this [Carolina Journal print](#) and [TV](#) story).

The other major energy conversation in North Carolina is around fracking. Conservative lawmakers are working to streamline fracking permitting, tapping into the desire to for energy independence and jobs by calling their bill the Domestic Energy Jobs Act. [Rigzone](#) explains, “North Carolina hopes recent legislation introduced into its general assembly will send a ‘very clear signal’ to oil and gas companies that the state wants shale gas exploration in the state.”

Opponents of the bill, like Democratic Senator Floyd McKissick Jr. warn, “You could see the carte blanche issuance of those permits without regulations in place.” WUNC North Carolina Public Radio [ran an entire series](#) on fracking in North Carolina detailing concerns about land rights, water usage and pollution.

Aside from energy, the state is working to develop tourism and strengthen the local food economy. Outside of campus blog posts, we found relatively light coverage of a [project at Appalachian State University](#) to map wineries and farm-to-table restaurants to draw people off the highway and into local communities, and North Carolina State’s Center for Environmental Farming Systems’ [recent \\$3.9 million grant](#) to strengthen local food systems.

Kentucky

Energy news in Kentucky is shaped in large part by Senator Mitch McConnell’s [refrain that Obama is waging a war on coal](#):

“Wherever I go in Kentucky, I see President Obama’s policies have raised energy rates, decreased domestic energy production, and cost jobs. A barrage of regulations from the EPA is strangling one of our state’s most important industries—the coal industry—and Kentucky miners and the thousands whose jobs rely on mining are feeling it.”

The war on coal theme is coupled by a politicized narrative about the role of regulations in preventing economic growth. For example, a new hybrid coal and biomass plant in Wise County [was hailed as an high tech marvel](#) that could power 146,000 homes with clean energy, but officials “lamented it would be the last of its kind” due to new regulations.

As is the case elsewhere in the region, much of the coverage we reviewed in Eastern Kentucky was of the handwringing variety, with stories quoting residents’ concerns about [declining severance tax revenues](#), and a loss of high paying mining jobs.

Coal executives and other pro-industry voices are often quoted in the news arguing that renewable energy sources like wind and solar [are not viable in Kentucky](#). Jim, Watlers of Bluegrass Institute called government supported like Abound Solar a “[pie in the sky scheme](#).” But there are elected officials like Representative Greg Stumbo championing clean energy. He wrote [in the Floyd County Times in June 2012](#):

“Although coal is by far the biggest fossil fuel we produce, we’re seeing a strong surge in natural gas as well; its production went up almost a fifth between 2009 and 2010. As the country looks for ways to boost homegrown energy, conservation and renewables are also getting more attention, and Kentucky is playing a leading role here as well. Renewable energy production in the commonwealth saw double-digit growth in 2009, with hydroelectric sources providing half of the total. Wood, biomass, ethanol and then geothermal made up the other half.”

Interestingly, Stumbo was criticized in this [March 20 letter to the editor](#) for opposing an effort by Mitch McConnell and Rand Paul to legalize industrial hemp production for biofuel (a topic which also generated a lot of buzz in the blogosphere). Aside from the hemp discussion, and [this Blue in Bluegrass blog post](#) calling for more solar, we found little content about renewable energy development in Eastern Kentucky. We did find some discussion on energy efficiency, including a quote by Governor Steve Beshear [in a story about the new University of Kentucky energy efficiency research center](#).

We saw little coverage suggesting forestry or sustainable agriculture were major economic drivers in Kentucky, although Justin Maxson of the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development wrote a [Mountain Eagle op-ed](#) and was quoted in [this Daily Caller story](#) calling for more investment in these sectors:

“Eastern Kentucky has many of the building blocks for a stronger, homegrown economy — through strategies like entrepreneurship, and more support for sectors like forestry, agriculture, tourism, health care and energy efficiency to name a few — but they require real investment and forward looking leadership.”

Tennessee

Tennessee is a bit of an outlier, in that we found comparatively little handwringing about the economic and social impacts of coal’s decline. In fact, coverage focused on regional trends in the coal industry was largely absent. Instead, media focused on a [failed bill to ban mountaintop removal mining in the state](#), and the [impact of mechanization on mining jobs](#).

While the proposed mountaintop removal mining ban was unsuccessful, the coverage highlighted some unexpected champions, such as the Tennessee Conservative Union, which [launched an ad campaign](#) in response to the purchase of a Tennessee mountain by “communist” Chinese investors. JW Randolph of Appalachian Voices [said](#),

“Blowing up mountains is a bad idea. The fact that everybody from the most liberal and progressive people in the state support protecting our mountains, and the most conservative people in our state support protecting our mountains, I think, gives me a lot of hope.”

The bill was called the “Scenic Vistas Protection Act,” and several stories touted the value of [tourism as a reason to protect the mountains](#). Sponsor Senator Lowe Finney [said](#) the bill was important “because of its intent to ‘preserve’ one of the state’s ‘greatest assets.’” Indeed, [Tennessee’s new Rocky Top Trail](#), created by the Department of Tourist Development, features the state’s mountains, as well as many small towns and cultural attractions.

Tennessee’s power company, the Tennessee Valley Authority, was in the news often in the past year. A proposal to privatize the public company was [criticized by the Knoxville News Sentinel](#)’s editorial board, and there was debate about the virtues of investing in energy efficiency versus pollution controls for aging coal plants, as in [this article](#) from the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, which quoted Tennessee Environmental Council’s John McFadden as saying:

“If we spent half as much on energy efficiency as what we’re spending to install scrubbers on the Gallatin plant, we’d save much more power and create many more jobs. We’re putting a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound when we put these scrubbers on these old plants.”

While solar and wind are growing industries in Tennessee—indeed the [Tennessee Valley Authority received an award for leadership on wind energy](#)—few stories linked clean energy to jobs or economic development. One notable exception was this WBIR story about [Kingston solar project](#). Some stories focused on [power output](#), and some on [government incentives](#), which are a hot topic in the state since Senator Lamar Alexander is a [vocal opponent](#) of the federal wind energy credit.

MESSAGING ACROSS PLATFORMS

The line between traditional and social media is increasingly blurry. Journalists report stories, write blog posts, and tweet about their work and opinions. Stakeholders, community organizations and NGOs all weigh in via various democratized media platforms, making a local and regional media scan of the various messages difficult to parse.

In general, the coverage trends we saw in Central Appalachia followed those we have seen in other audits—the press often drives the conversation in the blogosphere and on Twitter. The exceptions are organizational blogs, and our scan turned up hundreds of blog posts by groups like Appalachian Voices, Sierra Club and Earthjustice. These blogs tended to have a greater focus on the health impacts of fossil fuels, and the potential of sustainable industries to support local economies.

The 140-character limit on Twitter makes in-depth discussion difficult, and the tweets we reviewed tended to focus more on the circumstances and problems rather than solutions. However, we did find tweets from nonprofits, journalists and elected officials about wind farms, local food and other positive news.



Dee Davis
@IAmFlyRock

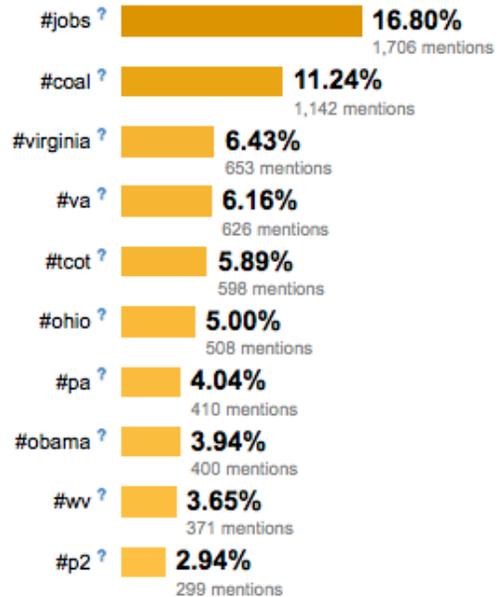
EcoWatch: [#Coal](#) is Not the Key: The Need to Diversify the Economy in Central Appalachia. Prosperity lies elsewhere. ecowatch.com/2013/moving-be...

Reply Retweet Favorite Pocket More

[impact reports](#) to color commentary like [this tweet](#) from West Virginia resident James Richardson. The conversation about biomass and biofuel is happening at a much smaller scale and tends to discuss individual [projects](#) or [research programs](#). There were just over a thousand tweets about energy efficiency in Central Appalachian states during our study period, but few mentioned the economy or jobs. Most were generated by energy efficiency businesses or advocacy groups.

Overall energy conversation drivers include individuals like [@PreciousLiberty](#), whose Twitter bio reads, “Waiting patiently for the corruption Obama has sown to smell like rotten garbage, even to the #liberals” and [@TriciaNC1](#), and well as conservative political voices like [@WVYoungGOP](#), and [@McConnellPress](#). However, media sources like [@Kenwardjr](#), [@wbir](#) and the [@AP](#), and green groups like [@AppVoices](#), [@SierraClubNC](#), [@wnca](#), [@VCNVAorg](#) and [@ACORE](#) were also tweeting—and being retweeted—frequently on Central Appalachian energy.

The top hashtags used in the energy conversation are shown in the list to the right. Most will be self-explanatory, but #TCOT stands for “top conservatives on Twitter,” and #P2 refers to progressive politics. Note that Ohio and Pennsylvania are frequently mentioned, despite the fact that they were not included in our search query—this was largely driven by discussion of Marcellus Shale development.



Local food and agriculture on Twitter

We use two different food queries on Twitter to find all the tweets mentioning the food economy, and then just those focused on local food and sustainable agriculture. We found 3,576 tweets using this query: ("west virginia" OR WV OR kentucky OR KY OR tennessee OR TN OR "north carolina" OR NC OR "virginia" OR VA OR SWVA OR "central appalachia") AND ("sustainable agriculture" OR #sustainableag OR #susag OR "local food" OR "local farms" OR agriculture) AND (transition OR renewal OR development OR diversification OR economy OR jobs).

Most focused on the revenue generated by the agriculture industry (like [this one](#) on Virginia and [this one](#) on North Carolina, both generating a number of retweets during Ag Week in March 2013). There were several solution stories that got traction on Twitter, including news about a [grant to support West Virginia food entrepreneurs](#), an [urban farm school in Asheville, North Carolina’s beginning farmers program](#), and Kentucky’s [local food movement](#).

When we removed the word “agriculture,” we found just 89 tweets, so we settled on this query, which produced 2105 tweets: OR "west virginia" OR WV OR kentucky OR KY OR tennessee OR TN OR "north carolina" OR NC OR "virginia" OR VA OR SWVA OR "central appalachia") AND ("sustainable agriculture" OR #sustainableag OR #susag OR "local food" OR #localfood OR "local farms" OR "farmers markets").

Many of the resulting tweets were about news from outside Appalachia, like [Lexington’s local food economy](#), [Louisville Farm to Table](#), and [eating local in Charlotte](#). However, a [Virginia program](#) to incentivize residents to shop at farmer’s markets generated 10 tweets, and we found dozens of tweets about the [Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project](#) and the [Appalachian Local Food Map Guide](#), mostly generated by local food groups.

As was the case with blog and news content, tweets about food tended not to use transition language. However, one of the most retweeted tweets from our scan—a [Daily Yonder tweet](#) about the ARC’s food tour—connected economic development and local food.

Aside from the tweet to the right from [@mcconnellpress](#), the food and agriculture content we found on Twitter was far less political than the energy conversation, with media outlets and nonprofits driving conversation. Top influencers include [@localize_nc](#), [@FMCorg](#), [@reclamngourfood](#), [@davetabler](#), [@ashevillegrown](#), [@AppTransition](#).



The top hashtags around local food include #localfood, #sustainableag, and #agriculture.

Central Appalachian tourism on Twitter

The Twitter conversation about tourism rarely mentions energy, or the choice between developing new mines and protecting natural attractions. We found a few tweets like the one to the right that compared the job numbers between the coal and tourism industries, and [this one](#) from Kentuckians for the Commonwealth that calls tourism a “renewable resource.”



MEDIA AND DIGITAL AUDIT

We used the following query, which turned up 392 tweets: ("west virginia" OR WV OR kentucky OR KY OR tennessee OR TN OR "north carolina" OR NC OR "virginia" OR VA OR SWVA OR "central appalachia") AND tourism AND (economy OR jobs OR development OR renewal OR transition OR redevelopment).

Most of the tourism tweets were generated by government agencies and elected officials or media outlets reporting on tourism facts and figures. Influencers included [@kygov](#), [@kyforward](#), [@LouisvilleNews](#), [@APA_Virginia](#), and [@NCTourism](#). As the word cloud to the right shows, Kentucky tourism came up most frequently, followed by the Virginias. Top hashtags included #jobs, #travel, and #tourism.



ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Coal's future viability: Contested or not?

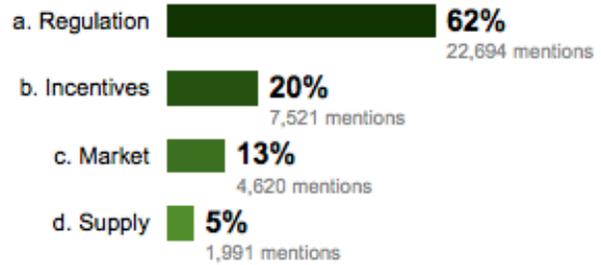
We found a general consensus that coal production and demand will continue to slide in the region—due to the finite nature of the resource, market forces, seam quality and regulations. However, information that suggests otherwise gets sizable play in the region's news media. For example, many newspapers and blogs picked up on a section Downstream Strategies' May 2013 report, [The Continuing Decline in Demand for Central Appalachian Coal: Market and Regulatory Influences](#), which suggested coal employment would remain high in some parts of the region:

“Even as coal production declines in the future across the region, coal mining jobs are projected to increase due to a decline in labor productivity...However, as a result of the overall decline in coal production, the job and revenue benefits will not be spread evenly across all counties. Some coal-producing counties may experience significant declines in both jobs and revenues, while other counties may experience increases. The resulting expectation is that the benefits of coal production may become more concentrated in fewer counties.”

And pro-coal spokespeople happily exploit this thread, suggesting that new mining technology would enable companies to mine reserves that weren't previously accessible, and that regulations are the primary obstacles to prosperity and energy independence.

Framing the problem

As noted above, most news and blog stories acknowledge that coal’s decline has several causes. There is more discussion about regulations than other factors, such as changes in the market, dwindling supply, and clean energy incentives (see chart below), but even small local papers mention mild winters and low natural gas prices when describing the industry’s plight. The high volume of regulation-focused coverage reflects the tendency of local and regional media to cover energy policy news in great detail. Most stories are framed around process and quote elected officials or industry representatives opining on a law’s potential impacts.

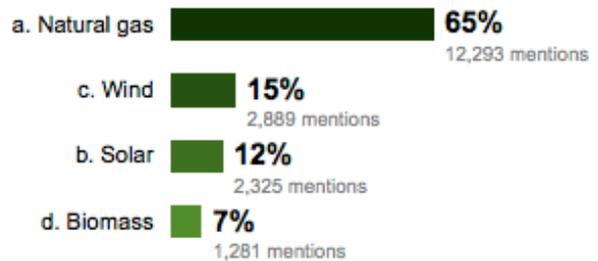


Coverage on the health impacts of coal mining and coal-fired power was largely absent from mainstream media and blogs. There were some exceptions, as in articles about the [lawsuits against Duke Energy for coal ash pollution](#), the [university](#) and [industry](#) studies about health impacts of mountaintop removal mining, and [coal dust limits](#) designed to address black lung disease. But the public health message promoted by clean energy and environmental advocates does not seem to have gained much traction in local media. One notable exception is Ken Ward Jr. of the *West Virginia Gazette*, who is perhaps the most prolific and friendly reporter in the region. He mentions health, water quality and air pollution frequently.

Talk of solutions

As noted above, most solution stories we found are separate from the meta narrative about coal’s decline. They tend to be more local in scale, and are often framed around policy, funding news, or corporate and nonprofit projects. We did find some trend stories about the clean energy economy, like [this Charlotte Observer article](#) contrasting nomadic jobs in renewables development versus those created by fracking.

As the chart at the right shows, the volume of coverage on wind, solar and biomass is still dwarfed by the number of stories about natural gas. The massive scale of Marcellus Shale development in Pennsylvania and northern West Virginia has [underscored its potential as a source of energy, jobs and tax revenue](#). However, hydraulic fracturing remains controversial, and the economic potential varies greatly by state, depending on reserves.



While Central Appalachian states have made some major strides in clean energy development (with North Carolina the first southern state to require utilities to use renewable energy, for instance, and Tennessee winning national recognition for leadership on wind power), we found relatively thin media coverage about this good news outside of green and progressive outlets. More mainstream press and local blogs focus primarily on fossil fuel news.

Transition terminology

The transition language that Resource Media heard from stakeholders—words like “sustainable” and “redevelopment,” and “economic diversity” and “reclamation”—rarely occur in media conversations, aside from those driven by advocates (as in opinion coverage and organizational blogs).

Most mentions of transition in the press are about energy—either a move from coal to natural gas, or a shift towards more renewable energy. As noted above, most of the stories about sustainable community and economic development are happening on a hyper local scale, and are not framed in terms of a broader transition.

Who is covering the transition conversation?

There are a handful of fairly prominent reporters covering the transition, and their work often spans traditional and digital media.

Ken Ward Jr. writes about energy and mining for the *Charleston Gazette*, West Virginia’s largest newspaper. He also writes the well-regarded [Coal Tattoo blog](#) for the *Gazette*, and is active on [Twitter](#), where he has 4778 followers. The *Columbia Journalism Review* [called him](#) “one of the nation’s top coal reporters” and he [got sued](#) by Murray Energy for implying that their work involves criminal elements. His work is frank, and generally features pro-transition angles.

Taylor Kuykendall is the energy reporter for the *State Journal* in West Virginia. He is active on [Twitter](#), where he has 1093 followers. Mr. Kuykendall covers transition without much bias, and writes often from a business angle.

[James Bruggers](#) writes and blogs for *The Courier-Journal*, where his blog is called [Watchdog Earth](#). He is active on [Twitter](#) where he has 2532 followers. He self-identifies as an “Environmental Reporter” and covers a wide variety of environmental issues.

[Erica Peterson](#) covers energy and environment for WFPL, Louisville’s NPR member station, and she writes the [Smokestack](#) blog. She is active on [Twitter](#), where she has 1013 followers.

Matthew Rand occasionally covers transition-related topics for WYMT/WKYT.com, the CBS affiliate in Lexington. He is active on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/), where he has 169 followers.

Smaller local papers write often about coal’s decline, and also cover clean energy, food and tourism news in their areas, but are less likely to discuss the “transition” as such.

Spokespeople

Unsurprisingly, news stories about Central Appalachia’s plight often feature quotes from coal miners or their wives. Most were of the handwringing variety, but [some](#) distinguish between the interests of coal companies and those of workers, and called for policies that put communities’ needs and public health first.

Elected officials fell on both sides of the transition conversation. Many in the region decry oppressive regulations and argue for policies that will be friendlier to business (fossil fuel companies, specifically). But others tout the potential of local food, tourism, or other emerging industries to put people to work.

Most nonprofit quotes we saw are in favor of sustainable development and hopeful about the prospects of renewable energy, agriculture and forestry. Most statements from industry representatives focused on business and policy.

CONCLUSIONS

As described above, there is a difference in scale between the challenges facing Central Appalachia and the solutions at hand. Media and digital coverage of coal’s decline and the many consequences for the region’s economy and culture is persistent and pervasive. Stories about solutions, meanwhile, are hyper-local and isolated. With the exception of natural gas in some areas, solutions to match the scale and scope of the problem are largely missing from the conversation.

This raises some interesting questions for blue moon fund and its grantees. As Justin Maxson of Mountain Association for Community Economic Development put it in [an op-ed in the *Lexington Herald Ledger*](#), “It is unlikely there will be any one solution to the longstanding economic problems in the region; we shouldn’t waste time looking for a silver bullet, but work on finding silver BBs.”

If there is no silver bullet, and the task at hand is pulling together enough silver BBs to help the region turn the corner, then what is the most strategic way for blue moon fund grantees to support that effort? Are there ways to coordinate the work and outreach around it so that the isolated solution-stories we see peppered throughout the coverage start adding up to a larger narrative

about the potential and promise of what's to come? And, given regional variation, is it possible to come up with a region-wide strategy, or is it necessary to focus on state and county-specific conversations one-by-one?

And, given the general bias we found in news media in favor of coal – in terms of the preponderance of coverage, the tendency to highlight any argument suggesting that ‘reports of coal’s death have been greatly exaggerated’ (to quote Mark Twain) and the tendency to under-report other industries (for example solar energy in North Carolina) – what is the best posture and strategy for grantees to positively influence existing coverage and gradually shift the frame in a better direction?

And finally, given the politicized nature of conversations around the role of government in promoting various forms of energy development and the impact of regulations on economic development, what is the best way to advance policy solutions without getting mired in ideological conversations about the role of government?

None of these questions are easy to answer, and they will be best explored in coordination with blue moon fund and its grantees. Our answers and recommendations will also be informed by other elements of our research, including analysis of available public opinion research, ongoing conversations with advocates and thought leaders in the region, and the review of a variety of materials.