**Breathing Life Into Our Struggling Coal Communities**

[LOCAL COLUMNS](https://www.theintelligencer.net/opinion/local-columns/)

JUL 10, 2021

W.VA. SEN. CRAIG BLAIR

When a state is faced with a problem, it’s faced with a choice:

Solve the problem, or find someone to blame for it.

The Legislature is in the business of solving problems. During our recent special session, we urged the federal government to allocate $8 billion for coal mine reclamation from its $38 billion available to help coal and power plant communities.

Some critics out there want to say that the state’s passing the buck or letting coal companies get out of their obligations while throwing that cost on to the taxpayers. These same critics fail to tell you the entire story here.

It’s time to set the record straight with some facts.

– In 2019, 40 percent of West Virginia’s counties had active coal mine operations. It’s not just southern West Virginia, either. Five of the top 25 Bureau of Land Statistics areas associated with key coal occupations are in West Virginia, including Wheeling at No. 3.

– West Virginia is already a carbon-neutral state. The vast expanse of trees and forests that fill our mountains more than offset our carbon emissions.

– Hundreds of thousands of acres of West Virginia land are being leased to out-of-state corporations in the northeast and California to be used as a carbon credit. These leases come with very strict terms and conditions upon the land that prohibit it from being used for any kind of recreational, commercial, or residential purpose — which wipes out any financial benefit whatsoever that West Virginia could see from this activity.

– Only a fraction of the nearly 30,789 acres of forfeited mine sites in West Virginia have been reclaimed. Because of federal regulations and restrictions, combined with increasing pressure from Washington, D.C., to reduce carbon emissions, many coal companies cannot even obtain loans for working capital or insurance on their existing assets.

No money to make capital improvements and no insurance to cover the operation leads to bankrupt and shuttered coal mines, out-of-work coal miners, and company liabilities for reclamation being shifted right to the state of West Virginia.

– Mine reclamation and the cleanup of abandoned mine sites can be directly linked to improving West Virginia’s infrastructure — something we all agree needs attention.

The problems presented to the Legislature’s Post Audits Subcommittee in its audit of DEP’s Special Reclamation Funds were sobering. However, they were not surprising. West Virginia’s coal industry has been in decline for more than 40 years, and that decline has accelerated during the last decade and a half. Dramatic shifts in federal regulations and environmental policies have put a disproportionate burden right on the shoulders of these companies. Some companies have just walked away, leaving us holding the bag.

That’s not acceptable, especially when there are means to help. An infusion of federal funding, which includes about $200 million right away to West Virginia through The RECLAIM Act, would spur immediate job creation in our struggling coalfield communities. The average age of an unemployed coal miner in West Virginia is 47 years old. With minimal cost, we can retrain displaced coal miners to work on reclaiming abandoned and forfeited mine sites. Many of these miners will already be familiar with these locations from their previous jobs there, and we would be providing them with job opportunities that could see them through to retirement age.

This funding would breathe new life into development options in some of our most economically depressed areas. Locally driven, sustained reclamation operations can help build brighter futures in our coal communities, clean up and restore wildlife habitats, and improve water quality. As we keep moving toward West Virginia’s 21st century economy, these reclaimed sites will give us the opportunity for further development that we’re already aggressively pursuing. It keeps more West Virginians working and paying taxes, which benefits our schools and roads. It’s a win-win situation.

For generations, West Virginia has been a nationwide leader in coal production. Coal is unique in its ability to be stored like a battery, which means our supplies are always ready to power the country. It doesn’t just keep the lights on. It keeps America safe. It helped power this country through World War II, and it keeps powering us through the war against terrorism today. Our state’s coal miners and their families have endured hardships, even death, to keep America running.

With the help of our leaders in Congress, our future looks hopeful. We have the tools at the ready to rebuild West Virginia’s struggling coal communities. Let’s get to work.

West Virginia Senate President Craig Blair represents the Fifteenth Senatorial District, which includes Morgan and Hampshire counties and parts of Berkeley and Mineral counties. Prior to being elected Senate President in 2021, he served as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Finance and the Senate Committee on Government Organization.