

Green With Envy: Coal consumption is a heavy burden to bear

Published: Monday, April 21, 2008

Last Modified: Sunday, April 20, 2008, 10:04:36pm

Cathy Wilson / For The Post / cw224805@ohiou.edu



There's nothing like the feeling of dumping your backpack on the floor after a long day of classes. It's a relief to hear the thump of the books hit the ground, a signal that class is over for the day, and there is finally time to sit down and relax. But imagine that you never got to enjoy this feeling; imagine that you always had to carry around those four or five heavy textbooks, your body weighed down everyday from day to night without a break. That's a pretty cumbersome burden to deal with on a daily basis.

But it is a burden we unknowingly each put on the planet every day, as we each use 20 pounds of coal to satisfy our daily demand for electricity. At his lecture last Wednesday, Jeff Goodell presented this number, one that is a fairly common estimate, as the amount of coal we use to power lights, computers, television, phone chargers, etc. That electricity comes from coal-fired power plants, which have a life-span of 40 to 50 years. Think of how miserable you'd be at 70 years old, having to tote around those five textbooks everywhere you go.

Coal-fired plants continue to be built even though they will be a fixture for decades and cause damage not only to the environment in a general sense, but very much so to human health. *Blue Egg* cited the American Lung Association when it reported that about 24,000 preventable deaths occur each year because of health problems related to coal-fired power plants.

These power plants pollute the air with small pollution particles that can get into the lungs and especially effect people with lung or cardiovascular problems, but respiratory and cardiovascular problems can emerge from consistent exposure to the pollutants. A study of West Virginia coal mining and its effects on health was published in the *American Journal of Public Health* and linked people who live in areas where coal is mined to chronic health problems such as lung and kidney diseases. One of the authors of the study got the idea for it after reading Jeff Goodell's book about the coal industry.

West Virginia is the second-largest coal-producing state, accounting for 15 percent of the country's coal and half of its exports, according to the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training. Meigs, Vinton and Perry counties, which all surround Athens County, ranked second, fourth and sixth respectively out of all Ohio counties that produced coal in 2001, according to the Ohio Coal Association. The coal industry is alive and well in our neck of the woods.

The Energy Information Administration recently published its review of the coal industry for 2007, and it said that although coal production decreased, coal consumption increased. Our demand for coal continues to grow even though it pollutes the air, pollutes the water and there are more sustainable energy sources that lack the funding to be developed. But don't worry — the EIA has a good outlook for the coal industry for 2008. Somehow, that doesn't resonate as reassuring.

An increase in production means two things: There is an increase in demand (which has been established), and there will be more coal burned and more detrimental effects to the people and wildlife who live in the vicinity, sometimes even farther away

depending where the wind or water take the pollution.

In Ohio, 87 percent of our electricity comes from coal, according to the Ohio Coal Association, which means we are not only at risk because of the coal we burn, but we are heavy contributors to its production. It's a double-edged sword — heavy reliance on an energy resource that puts us at a higher risk for health problems.

One helpful step is to take note of where electricity is coming from every time we touch a light switch or plug in an electronic. As Americans, our appetite for energy is large, but we eventually reach a point where we realize our eyes are bigger than our stomachs. We realized it this year with fuel prices jumping to over \$3 per gallon, which lead to a decrease in driving last year for the first time in 20 years. Hopefully, we can realize that coal is not the cheap energy source it once was, and we will invest our demand in cleaner, more sustainable energy sources.

We rely on electricity as if it is a right to have, rather than a privilege. Reducing the amount of electricity we demand and promoting and investing in renewable energy would illustrate that we aren't interested in a future filled with coal. Businesses follow the trail of money, and right now we are paving the coal path with dollars we should be using toward solar, wind and other technologies. Fifty years is a long commitment — imagine signing a contract to go to college 12 times.

The fights to cut carbon emissions, preserve nature and keep our health in tact are not contained to Washington, D.C. Signing petitions and taking action to prevent coal-fired power plants from being built, reducing electricity consumption and promoting renewable energy are just a few ways to lighten that burden so that in 50 years, your back won't be aching from it. P.S. Happy Earth Day tomorrow!

Cathy Wilson is a junior journalism major. Send her an e-mail at cw224805@ohiou.edu.