

## 5 TIPS FOR ENGAGING IN COAL COUNTRY

By Climate Access

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While coal may be dead, the fight over its role in America is far from over. Reviving coal is a cornerstone of the federal administration's policy and ideological platform, and coal community needs are being used to justify cuts to important environmental policies and social programs. How can advocates effectively reach audiences at the center of these issues and build public will in favor of the move away from coal?

Recent research and commentary points to the importance of knowing how coal is viewed and valued in communities that are dependent on it. The following tip sheet summarizes some of this data, offering five considerations for how to engage those in coal country around the energy transition.

### 1. Distinguish between political rhetoric and community views

Intense political and media rhetoric can make it easy to overestimate opposition to clean energy and environmental regulations in coal mining states. But public opinion polling shows that a majority of Americans in many of these places both back the growth of renewables and stronger regulations for power plants. An estimated 68% of people [support](#) setting strict CO2 limits on existing coal-fired power plants in Kentucky, home to the third highest number of coal jobs in the U.S.

Opinion data is reinforced by [interviews](#) with people living and working in West Virginia coal communities, which revealed a "mostly consistent thread of acceptance and awareness of the energy transition" away from coal. While many were initially angry at the transition, interviews showed that efforts are already underway within these Appalachian communities and individual households to adapt. This research echoes [data](#) from two years ago showing many in coal country recognize its decline is underway and irreversible. The question for many is not whether, but how the transition will take place.

*Learn more:*

[Yale Climate Opinion Maps](#)

### 2. Recognize it's not about climate, energy or even jobs

Research and commentary points out how coal isn't just a source of employment but an essential part of the identities of those who mine it. Coal jobs have helped cultivate deep traditions of economic [independence and self-reliance](#), bolstering regional values around the importance of providing for family and contributing to the community. Recent [focus groups](#) identified coal as the "common bond – or identity – that held the entire community together", a phenomenon that's "amplified by strong attachments to location, landscape, and personal

networks”. For many, the decline of coal isn’t just about losing a job; it’s an assault on a way of life that can trigger anger, anxiety and even grief.

In this context, [engagement](#) needs to begin by framing the issues that are top-of-mind for people and connect to core values and worldviews. In many cases, the transition away from coal isn’t about climate change, alternative energy or even just employment, but relates to deeper attachments to place, family, community and history/tradition. Create opportunities for people to articulate and explore what is being lost in the transition, why it matters to them, and what could be gained from change. Storytelling can be an effective tool here, both to help audiences see themselves as part of the transition narrative, and as a way for them to add their own voices.

*Learn more:*

[Adaptation, culture and the energy transition in American coal country](#)

[Findings from Ethnography in Central Appalachia](#)

[Building more effective campaign narratives](#)

[The Land I Trust](#) (coal stories collected by Beyond Coal)

### **3. Tap latent optimism, especially among younger generations**

Strong identity ties to coal can disguise the excitement some may feel about what could come next. West Virginia focus groups [revealed](#) that many are excited about reinventing the region’s economy and identity. “When the transition began, it was marked by much anger and resentment,” according to the research. “Many noted, however, that anger has been replaced by excitement about new opportunities, and the recognition that the transition is real and inevitable, even if challenging.” Younger generations were among those showing some of the greatest optimism.

Catalyze this enthusiasm by framing outreach and focusing engagement around core community aspirations including diversifying the economy, improving health, addressing social inequities, and making communities more vibrant and resilient. Encourage dialogue around what people want to do next and help them define a pathway for getting there (see #4). When political leaders in Kentucky refused to develop a strategy for the state’s energy future as required by the Clean Power Plan, grassroots groups launched an effort to develop a citizens’ plan that was built on community conversations about the future they envisioned for themselves and clean energy.

*Learn more:*

[Empower Kentucky](#) (citizen engagement project)

#### 4. Outline pathways to solutions

Building support for a transition away from coal includes advocating for the right programs and supports for people who are affected. Coal jobs offer high pay for little skill and education, making employees less flexible to shift careers or adapt to change. Some may need retraining and or to relocate to find new employment. Others may be left high and dry by bankrupted coal companies that refuse to pay retirement, healthcare or pension benefits. These are the nuts and bolts issues that need to be addressed as communities move away from coal as a primary economic driver. Consider how to amplify local efforts or campaigns that look at coal miner rights and needs, particularly as retraining programs are being [scaled back](#).

Renewable energy should be highlighted as an important opportunity but not the only one, as a way to help break the cycle of single-force economies and to increase each community's resilience. While identify what a better future looks like, avoid "happy talk" and empty promises that aren't realistic in the near-term, as pragmatism is one of the [core orientations](#) in coal country.

*Learn more:*

[Communicating about jobs after coal](#)

[Tip sheet on engaging in coal country](#)

#### 5. Amplify the right messengers

Coal miners famously distrust environmental groups and activists. But they are also deeply skeptical of governments and somewhat suspicious of industry despite efforts to foster loyalty. Like others living in rural areas, they may not believe anyone outside of their community share their values. This underscores the importance of finding the right messengers for communicating the energy transition.

According to a [Grist article](#), coal companies have been able to spin the decline of coal as being either a failing of government/regulations (if it's an unfriendly president) or environmental groups (if it's a friendly president). Understanding who is being blamed in these communities at any given time is key to choosing which voices to amplify.

The most trusted entities are those who live and work in the community and are seen as hard-working and having the community's best interests in mind. While they may lack the same financial resources as larger organizations, local advocacy groups such as the [Center for Coalfield Justice in Pennsylvania](#) benefit from having staff and board members who are rooted in the community. Build coalitions with these groups, who have the greatest chance of connecting with residents and generating meaningful engagement around the transition process.