

You must see the exodus to grasp its magnitude. I've encountered the rumbling, clickety-clack caravan often lately as it snakes toward distant cities down the tracks.

Every day, thousands of railroad cars loaded with crushed coal leave Wyoming's Powder River Basin. Each shipment affirms the perception that Wyoming is a natural resources colony, beholden to other states and corporate interests for its economic lifeblood.

The fact is Wyoming today represents the fountainhead of coal in America. But are its politicians really cutting shrewd deals for her citizens?

This dense fossil fuel sitting latent in the ground for millions of years releases huge quantities of carbon into Earth's atmosphere when burned. (It also is causing widespread mercury contamination, which makes, for example, fish a health hazard to eat, especially for children and pregnant women.)

Coal isn't going away as a primary source of electricity. And Wyoming has a bounty to sell. Elected leaders are peddling the message of "use it or lose it."

Indeed, billions of dollars are being generated for state coffers, keeping taxes lower, paying for programs that benefit citizens. The positive short-term contributions of coal as a raw material are undeniable.

Burning it and causing pollution, however, represent a moral and ethical issue for this generation, as the impacts of our 21st-century coal economy must be weighed in a larger context. That is, if leaders truly are conscientious.

I was talking with David Wendt, president of the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs, last week — shortly after Gov. Matt Mead and U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced a deal to open more federal coal tracts in the state to development. It is the first of several blockbuster deals.

Wyomingites caught a glimpse of Wendt last year when he ran an unsuccessful underdog campaign for Congress. He doesn't pull punches.

Nor does he downplay the consequences of burning coal. Unlike some politicians, he refuses to pretend serious impacts don't exist to get elected.

Wendt has spent an inordinate amount of time leading bipartisan fact-finding missions to Wyoming's doppelganger in China — Shanxi province, a major coal producer and source of electricity.

Speaking from personal experience while accompanying Wendt and valley

Republicans Grant Larson and John Turner to Shanxi, I can attest that it's impossible to deny the costly pollution trade-offs of coal.

Coal is killing people in China. As a result of human health costs and lost economic productivity, the government is making globe-leading investments in cleaner, alternative energy that are quickly leaving the U.S. in the dust.

Gov. Matt Mead, Sens. John Barrasso and Mike Enzi, and Rep. Cynthia Lummis ought to accompany Wendt to China, as many prominent officials have, and see Shanxi firsthand. Wendt says the offer is on the table.

Meantime, he has another capital idea. Along with Wyoming being at the headwaters of coal, he believes the state should position itself at the forefront of clean-coal technology.

Instead of shipping coal out raw and losing a huge amount of its value, he asks, why not generate power in-state using cutting-edge carbon-capture

plants, selling electricity to markets on a hyper-efficient smart transmission grid, and positioning Wyoming at the forefront, not the caboose, of America's energy future?

In the deal announced between Mead and Salazar, the new federal coal tracts are expected to yield between \$13.5 billion and \$21 billion in revenue, with Wyoming collecting roughly half.

The time is now for a trifecta private-public partnership forged between Wyoming, Washington, D.C., and utilities to promote visionary energy generation through cleaner coal research and development.

The University of Wyoming campus, Wendt says, could become the Silicon Valley of coal technology, alternative energy and climate research.

The investment would produce permanent, forward-looking jobs, yield valuable skills and put Wyoming proudly in the driver's seat rather than having it treated by outside exploiters as a colonial backwater.

The only way to minimize Wyoming's Faustian bargain with coal, Wendt says, is to think boldly and long term.

"Members of our congressional delegation and our new governor talk about national self-sufficiency with energy, and they invoke words of patriotism and say they want America and Wyoming to be leaders. Good on them," Wendt says.

"It doesn't get any more patriotic than investing in the future," he adds.



The New West

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Todd Wilkinson writes his column for the News&Guide very week.