

Guest opinion: Let's have healthy conversations about coal

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Montana is in the midst of an important conversation about coal. Our state holds significant reserves of this fossil fuel, which over the decades has helped boost Montana's economy via mining and exports and to power our nation via the coal-fired plants in Colstrip. Coal is an important part of Montana's history.

Yet we've reached a juncture where we must discuss how coal fits into our future. There's great interest in mining more of this resource in our state and exporting it overseas. Local communities are concerned about the impact of increased rail traffic. There's also significant concern about how burning more Montana coal in China and elsewhere will affect our climate.

As physicians, we share these concerns, but also want to address the more immediate effects that the burning of coal has on public health. These hazards are well documented, but tend not to get the same amount attention as coal's impact on the larger environment.

Coal-fired power plants emit toxic pollution that causes illness and death. Toxins emitted by burning coal worsen asthma, bronchitis and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, causes heart attacks and strokes, lung and other cancers, and lead to birth defects.

Nationwide, coal-fired plants account for 386,000 tons of dangerous pollutants each year, including acid gases such as hydrogen chloride and hydrogen fluoride, which can burn the eyes, skin and breathing passages, lead, arsenic and other metals that can harm the lungs, kidneys and nervous system, and dioxins, which pose a risk for cancer.

We urge Montanans to learn more about the impacts of coal and their health, to insure that the coal's affects on human health are not overshadowed in the current debates over coal and our state's role in burning, mining and exporting it.

An informative resource to learn more about these issues is "The Silent Epidemic: Coal and the Hidden Threat to Health" by Alan Lockwood, M.D. This book from the MIT Press draws on numerous, peer-reviewed studies to examine every aspect of coal, from its complex medical makeup to the health effects of mining, burning, transporting and disposing of this fuel. These are all central issues to Montana residents.

Dr. Lockwood, an emeritus professor of neurology and nuclear medicine at the State University of New York, will visit several Montana communities this month. We encourage interested citizens to attend his lectures and to further engage in this conversation, which is so important to the future of our state and to the public health of its residents. Please see the box above for a schedule.

If you go

Dr. Alan Lockwood will speak on coal health issues at:

- 7 p.m. March 18 at Rocky Mountain College, Losekamp Hall, 1511 Poly Drive, Billings.
 - 7:30 p.m. March 19 at the Bozeman Public Library, 626 E. Main St., Bozeman.
 - 7:30 p.m. March 20 at the Lewis and Clark Public Library, 120 S. Last Chance Gulch, Helena.
 - 7 p.m. March 21 in room 123 of the Gallagher Business Building, University of Montana, Missoula.
- All events are free and open to the public. Refreshments will be served.

http://billingsgazette.com/news/opinion/guest/guest-opinion-let-s-have-healthy-conversations-about-coal/article_227f452a-548f-5a61-b339-29910d4966b9.html