



THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY INDEPENDENCE AND GLOBAL WARMING

Opening Statement of Chairman Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.)

April 14, 2010

“The Role of Coal in a New Energy Age”

This morning, the Select Committee is meeting to assess the present state of the coal industry, and explore how coal can continue to play a role in a new energy age.

Coal was mined in this country before it even was a country. The first 13 states appeared on a United States flag after coal mines appeared on our maps. Coal has helped power America for nearly 300 years.

And just like millions of other American families over the years, the Markeys had a close, personal relationship with coal. After my grandfather got off the boat from Ireland in 1902, he got a job hauling coal for the Locke Coal Company in Malden, Massachusetts. And when I was a boy, I spent many cold winter mornings shoveling coal into our furnace at home.

Much has changed since those days. We are entering a new energy age, an age in which technology is making it possible to harness energy from the wind, the sun, the atom, shale gases, and efficiency measures. Today, many Americans are asking if coal is safe enough, if coal is healthy enough, and if coal is innovative enough to be part of our shared clean energy future.

Nine days ago, in the Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia, 29 miners lost their lives. The incident reminds us that mining coal is a dangerous job performed by courageous people. We owe it to the fallen miners and their families to take a harder look at the entire structure of mining safety. Today, our prayers go out to the families of those who lost their lives, and to all coal miners.

The public is also concerned about how safe the mining and burning of coal is for our environment and our health. From the effects of mountaintop removal, to air pollution that causes asthma and other health effects, to mercury levels that spike near coal-fired power plants and catastrophic releases of fly ash, coal faces a myriad of environmental challenges.

Finally, the burning of coal also releases carbon dioxide, which traps heat and is causing the Earth’s temperature to rise. Climate change is a serious problem, and yet some in the coal industry deny that the problem of global warming even exists and have contributed to organizations that spread doubt about science and policy. That has led many to believe the industry is not committed to finding a solution to our pollution problems.

Meanwhile, the challenges from coal's competition are growing. Last year, coal's share of America's electricity generation dropped from forty-nine percent to forty-four percent due to increased competition and decreased demand.

In 2009, forty percent of all new electricity capacity built was from wind, roughly the same as natural gas. Meanwhile, no new coal plants broke ground. While the rest of the energy world is already moving to a lower-carbon future, people wonder whether the coal industry is stuck in another time.

When Henry Waxman and I were crafting the Waxman-Markey bill that passed the House last June, we worked with several Members from coal states to better understand the challenges faced by the coal industry and how to respond to those challenges. That's why we dedicated \$60 billion in assistance to the coal industry to help design and build the carbon capture and sequestration plants the industry so desperately needs.

And so the question on the future of the coal industry is whether the coal industry and coal-burning utilities will embrace innovation or stand pat and fight change?

We've seen this before. The American auto manufacturers successfully resisted new fuel economy standards, claiming that the technology to turn gas guzzlers to fuel sippers was neither available, affordable nor preferable. Eventually, the folly of their strategy of delay became clear. Consumers abandoned their products, and two of the three major American automakers received a U.S. government bailout in order to survive.

Today, with the future of the coal industry in your hands, I challenge you to join us in charting a new path forward to prevent a perilous outcome for your industry and for the planet.

I ask that you cease efforts to deny the science of global warming and stop spending millions of dollars in misleading the public as to the true science behind climate change.

I ask that you embrace the provisions of the Waxman-Markey bill that light the way ahead for your industry and that provide your industry with billions of dollars of financial assistance to help you transition to a low carbon economy.

I believe there is a successful future ahead for the coal industry, centered on safer and cleaner practices for your fuel, for your workers, and for the Earth.

I look forward to your testimony and thank you for coming.