



(Photo from the Charleston Gazette)

It was widely reported earlier this week that outspoken NASA climate scientist James Hansen and 30 others [were arrested](#) at a West Virginia coal operation where they were protesting mountaintop removal mining. The protesters were met at the mine by several hundred counter-protesters, described by the Charleston Gazette as “miners and family members” defending their jobs.

A [report](#) by scientists at West Virginia University, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Public Health Reports* (I’ve not linked to the journal because it requires a subscription) suggests that those counter-protesters might be wrong in thinking that continued coal mining is good for them.

The study compared the number of excess deaths in coal mining areas to the economic benefits of coal mining to those areas. Using either \$6.3 million (the average an earlier study calculated from 18 US regulatory agencies) or \$3.8 million (an EPA estimate) for the value of a life, the authors concluded that coal mining costs the region roughly two to five times what it brings in, without even counting the environmental losses on the cost side.

Of course, the real problem for those counter-protesters is that they need the short-term economic benefits of their mining jobs even if their paycheck comes at the price of a shortened life-span, and a denuded landscape. The authors of the study recognize that problem, and don’t pretend that they know how to solve it. But they point out that a new economy will not develop in coal mining regions as long as policy decisions don’t take full account of the costs of coal production as well as coal use. And they suggest that policies aimed at helping Appalachia develop more diverse employment opportunities will be better for the region’s health than propping up coal for as long as possible. As they put it in their paper:

The reliance on coal mining in some areas of Appalachia constitutes a de facto economic policy: coal is mined because it is present and because there is a market for it. However, other economic policies could be developed if reliance on this resource was not in the best interest of the local population.

The Charleston Gazette has a good story about the study [here](#).