Senator Jay Rockefeller (D-WV), the current chair of the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee has announced his retirement. Rockefeller is 75, and faced a tough re-election fight in West Virginia, which has gone from being the state of John L. Lewis to the state of Mitt Romney — it went for Romney last year by 37 points.

We probably should have figured that Rocky wasn't running again when he gave a brave speech on the Senate floor last year chastising the coal industry. That won't get you very far in Appalachia. But it is a speech worth remembering and reprinting below the jump.

I hope Rockefeller can continue to be a leader on these issues. Hundreds of thousands of people across the country have benefitted from his commitment to Medicaid expansion. They will receive health care because Jay Rockefeller stood up for them, even though virtually none of them will have heard of him.

Here is the speech:

[youtube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErN9v3e7zro]

Mr. President, I rise today in the shadow of one seemingly narrow Senate vote — the Inhofe resolution of disapproval of the Environmental Protection Agency's rules on mercury and air toxics — to talk about West Virginia. About our people – our way of life, our health, our state's economic opportunity – and about our future.

Coal has played an important part in our past and can play an important role in our future but it will only happen if we face reality.

This is a critical and contentious time in the Mountain State. The dialogue on coal, its impacts, and the federal government's role has reached a fevered pitch.

Carefully orchestrated messages that strike fear in the hearts of West Virginians and feed uncertainty about coal's future are the subject of paid television ads, billboards, break room bulletin boards, public meetings, letters and lobbying campaigns.

A daily onslaught declares that coal is under siege from harmful outside forces, and that the future of the state is bleak unless we somehow turn back the clock, ignore the present and block the future.

West Virginians understandably worry that a way of life and the dignity of a job is at stake. Change and uncertainty in the coal industry is unsettling. But my fear is that concerns are also being fueled by the narrow view of others with divergent motivations – one that denies the inevitability of change in the energy industry, and unfairly leaves coal miners in the dust.

The reality is that many who run the coal industry today would rather attack false enemies and deny real problems than find solutions.

Instead of facing the challenges and making tough decisions like men of a different era, they are abrogating their responsibilities to lead. Consol's Bobby Brown, was never timid, especially when he and the United Mine Workers turned around labor management relations in the central coal fields.

Scare tactics are a cynical waste of time, money and worst of all coal miners' hopes. But sadly, these coal operators have closed themselves off from any other opposing voices and few dared to speak out for change – even though it's been staring them in the face for years.

This reminds me of the auto industry, which also resisted change for decades. Coal operators should learn from both the mistakes and recent success of the auto industry. I passionately believe coal miners deserve better than they are getting from operators and West Virginia certainly deserves better too.

Let's start with the truth. Coal today faces real challenges, even threats and we all know what they are:

– First, our coal reserves are finite and many coal-fired power plants are aging. The cheap, easy coal seams are diminishing, and production is falling – especially in the Central Appalachian Basin in Southern West Virginia. Production is shifting to lower cost areas like the Illinois and Powder River Basins. The average age of our nation's 1,100-plus coal fired plants is 42.5 years, with hundreds of plants even older. These plants run less often, are less economic and the least efficient.

– Second, natural gas use is on the rise. Power companies are switching to natural gas because of lower prices, cheaper construction costs, lower emissions and vast, steady supplies. Even traditional coal companies like Consol are increasingly investing in natural gas over coal.

– Third, the shift to a lower carbon economy is not going away and it's a disservice to coal miners and their families to pretend that it is. Coal company operators deny that we need to do anything to address climate change despite the established scientific consensus and mounting national desire for a cleaner, healthier environment.

Despite the barrage of ads, the EPA alone is not going to make or break coal. There are many forces exerting pressure and that agency is just one of them.

We need real world solutions to protect the future of coal.

Two years ago, I offered a "time out" on EPA carbon rules — a two-year suspension that could have broken the logjam in Congress and given us an opportunity to address carbon issues legislatively.

But instead of supporting this approach, coal operators went for broke when they demanded a complete repeal of all EPA authority to address carbon emissions forever. They demanded all or nothing, turned aside a compromise and in the end got nothing.

Last year, they ran exactly the same play, demanding all or nothing on the cross-state air pollution rule – refusing to entertain any middle ground, and denying even a hint of legitimacy for the views on the other side. And they lost again, badly.

So here we are with another all-or-nothing resolution destined to fail. This foolish action wastes time and money that could have been invested in the future of coal. Instead, with each bad vote they give away more of their leverage and they lock in failure.

This time the issue is whether to block an EPA rule – the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS or Utility MACT) – that requires coal-fired power plants to reduce mercury and other toxic air pollution.

I oppose this resolution because I care so much about West Virginians.

Without good health it's difficult to hold down a job or live the American dream. Chronic illness is debilitating and impacts a family's income, prosperity and ultimately its happiness.

The annual health benefits of the rule are enormous. EPA has relied on thousands of

studies that established the serious and long term impact of these pollutants on premature deaths, heart attacks, hospitalizations, pregnant women, babies and children.

Moreover, it significantly reduces the largest remaining human-caused emissions of mercury–a potent neurotoxin with fetal impacts.

Maybe some can shrug off the advice of the American Academy of Pediatrics and others but I cannot.

This rule has been in the works through a public process for many years. Some businesses – including some utilities in West Virginia – already have invested in technology and are ready to comply.

Others haven't prepared – because they have chosen to focus on profits rather than upgrading or investing in these smaller, older and less efficient coal-fired plants that were paid for decades ago and that they'll tell you would be retired anyway.

That's right. Every single plant slated for closure in West Virginia was already on the chopping block from their own corporate boards within several years.

It's important to be truthful to miners that coal plants will close because of decisions made by corporate boards long ago – not just because of EPA regulations, but because the plants are no longer economical as utilities build low-emission natural gas plants.

Natural gas has its challenges, too – with serious questions about water contamination and shortages and other environmental concerns. But while coal executives pine for the past, natural gas looks to the future -investing in technologies to reduce their environmental footprint. And they're working with others on ways to support the safe development of gas – and we will all be watching.

It's not too late for the coal industry to step up and lead by embracing the realities of today and creating a sustainable future. Discard the scare tactics. Stop denying science. Listen to what markets are saying about greenhouse gases and other environmental concerns, to what West Virginians are saying about their water and air, their health, and the cost of caring for seniors and children who are most susceptible to pollution.

Stop and listen to West Virginians – miners and families included – who see that the bitterness of the fight has taken on more importance than any potential solutions. Those same miners care deeply about their children's health and the streams and mountains of West Virginia. They know we can't keep to the same path.

Miners, their families, and their neighbors are why I came to West Virginia and they are why I made our state my home. I've been proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with coal miners and we've done a lot of good together over the years.

For more than 20 years, I've worked to protect the health and safety of coal miners – everything from the historic Coal Act, to mine safety laws, pensions, and Black Lung benefits – always with miners' best interest in mind.

And despite what critics contend, I'm standing with coal miners today by voting against this resolution.

I don't support this Resolution of Disapproval because it does nothing to look to the future of coal. It does nothing to consider the voices of West Virginians. It moves us backward, not forward. And unless this industry aggressively leans into the future, coal miners will lose the most.

Beyond the frenzy over this one EPA rule, we need to focus squarely on the real task of finding a long-term future for coal that addresses legitimate environmental and health concerns.

Let me be clear. I'm frustrated with some of the top levels of the coal industry, but I'm not giving up hope for a strong clean coal future. To get there, we'll need a bold partner, innovation and major public and private investments.

In the meantime, we shouldn't forget that coal fired power plants provide good jobs for thousands of West Virginians. It remains the underpinning for many small communities and I will always be focused foremost on their future.

Instead of finger pointing, we should commit ourselves to a smart action plan that will help with job transition opportunities, sparking new manufacturing and exploring the next generation of technology.

None of this is impossible. Solving big challenges with American ingenuity is what we do. West Virginia knows energy and West Virginia doesn't shrink from challenge. We have the chance here to not just grudgingly accept the future – but to boldly

embrace it.