

Trump has promised to end the “war on coal” and bring the industry roaring back. The [NY Times](#) appropriately called this a “cruel promise,” because cheap natural gas has driven coal to its knees economically. That won’t change under Trump, who has promised even more fracking and gas production. But, as it turns out, even a revival for the coal industry wouldn’t help Appalachian coal miners and their communities. It’s not only cruel to give them false hopes. It also distracts from the need to help them adapt to their economic situation.

A new [issue brief](#) by Alan Krupnick at Resources for the Future (RFF) lays out the stark economics of the situation:

“Western coal is far cheaper because it is strip-mined (rather than deep-mined), driving the underlying labor productivity differences (29.3 short tons per worker-hour in Wyoming’s Powder River Basin versus 1.6 short-tons per tons per worker-hour in southern Appalachia.). And western coal is more desirable to utilities because it has a much lower sulfur content (if somewhat lower energy content) than eastern coal, so helps meet standards for sulfur dioxide emissions under the Clean Air Act.”

The cost disadvantage of Eastern coal is so great that even doubling the federal royalty on Western coal would hardly help. That would lead to a 15% increase in coal production in Northern Appalachia and a 7% increase in Central Appalachia. And of course, Trump has no intention of increasing royalties for mining on federal lands — if anything, he’s going to open more federal lands for mining and further cut into the market for eastern coal. The [basic fact](#) is that the most accessible, cheapest coal in Appalachia is gone, and the cost curve is rising.

What about coal exports? Could a booming export market revive Eastern coal? The answer is no. Here, too, Eastern coal is at a disadvantage. The potential export markets are in Asia. So Western coal will have a transportation advantage in export to those markets, even assuming that Trump is successful in boosting U.S. coal exports. And a big surge in exports seems less feasible than it did a few years ago anyway, since China is working to deal with its horrendous air pollution problems.

It’s impossible not to sympathize with the plight of the people who used to depend on mining for their livelihoods. As the mayor of one Kentucky mining town [said](#):

“Coal was our golden egg and it just no longer exists and people are struggling to make ends meet,” said James Craft, Whitesburg’s mayor for the past 10 years.

“The impact has been absolutely devastating, with no discernible method of income for most of the people,’ Craft told FoxNews.com. We desperately need some infusion from the federal government.”

Currently, that town’s best hope is planned construction of a new maximum security federal prison. But that’s not something that can be duplicated on a massive scale. In areas that have unemployment rates twice or three times the national average, something more needs to happen. But that “something more” isn’t going to be the return of mining jobs. If he wants to help those people, Trump needs to come up with something new.