Bad children, supposedly, will get only lumps of coal in their stockings. That could be taken as a metaphor for the anti-environmental programs coming down the line, but I have in mind something a bit less metaphorical. According to a recent report, coal-fired power plants have immense piles of coal – 138 million tons, equal to the entire output of Appalachia. There’s a reason for that: coal plants aren’t burning as much coal as they used to.

When Trump first took office in 2017, coal use was just under 60 million tons a year. It went down while he was in office, despite his pledges to revive it. It’ now around 30 million tons a year. Reduced use of coal is good news for the American public as a whole though not for coal miners. It’s a much dirtier fuel than natural gas, let alone renewables, in terms of climate change and air pollution.

Many people in Appalachia blamed Obama for the decline of coal, an idea Trump was happy to exploit. But coal use plateaued and started to fall during the Bush Administration, and the rate of decline has been quite steady since 2008 regardless of who was in the White House. Increased deployment of renewables has undoubtedly contributed to the problem, and coal plants have had to contend with tougher pollution regulations over the years. But the basic reason for the decline of coal had nothing to do with environmentalists. It was fracking. Coal is no longer competitive with natural gas or renewables, so coal plants have been closing and the remaining plants run less frequently.

Eventually, the plant operators are going to want to reduce the costs of carrying that much inventory, which will cause a dip in coal production as they use up their mountains of coal. In the long run, however, it seems likely that the economics of coal will only get worse since prices for renewables and battery storage are continuing to fall.

So yes, America, there’s a pile of coal in your stocking this Christmas. But that’s a good thing. We are continuing to transition away from an outmoded power source. We need to provide new opportunities for communities that were dedicated to coal production, but the rest of us can literally breathe easier without the dangerous particulates that coal produces.