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National Op Ed

What’s President Obama’s beef with fossils? Well to be more precise, fossil fuels, Obama has been at the forefront of a campaign to eliminate coal from America’s energy diet. It seems like economic suicide considering we currently rely on America’s massive coal reserves to provide 40% of the nation’s power annually. The U.S. department of commerce estimates that the absence of the coal industry would reduce national GDP by 50 billion annually. Obama has announced that the E.P.A will soon be rolling out new policies that will require the coal industry to install expensive carbon capture technology that will ultimately bankrupt all coal burning power plants. All this commotion begs the question … why?

What do we stand to gain from banishing coal? The real question is; what does coal cost us? Coal is currently far and long the greatest contributor of smog, soot, acid rain, global warming, toxic air as well as water pollutants. When lobbyists hired by coal companies discuss the effects of their industry, they try to make it personal. They focus on the people, whose income is dependent on their industry, perhaps even entire regions whose lively hood depends on coal. Just like a good magician, these lobbyists are hiding something from us in plain sight. They direct our attention to those who would be hurt in the absence of their industry; in the hopes that we ignore the externalities of burning coal that affect all of us.

An externality is a personal investment that affects individuals who took no part in the making of that investment. For example, getting vaccinated not only protects you from disease but also eliminates you from the pool of people who could potentially spread that disease. Your vaccine protects you and the people around you, and as such is a positive externality; other examples include education and bee keeping because they benefit people who did not incur their cost.

The burning of Coal is also an externality, but conversely carries a negative connotation because it costs people who have no association with the coal industry. The implications of coal burning are far-reaching and severe. The global warming caused by green house gases produced in the burning of coal have been proven to cause sea level rise and massive storm events, responsible for thousands of deaths and billions of dollars in structural damages. The gases emitted when coal is burnt are also responsible for irregularities in atmospheric pressure and temperature, as well as the creation of acid rain, which all lead to crop failures and subsequently famine. These consequences are often felt in areas that are not prolific coal consumers but rather, helpless victims, such as Africa. Coal burning has become such a problem that in certain regions such as China, there are between 350,000 to 500,000 people who die every year as a direct result of pm 2.5 particle inhalation, a byproduct of… you guessed it, coal.

The solution in this case comes easier than most. The legislature necessary to clean up our mess is already underway. Unfortunately, every day citizens would rather keep a few bucks in their pockets today at the cost of a small fortune at some point later in time. In order to remedy our illness, American citizens must exercise enough collective foresight to allow the E.P.A’s new regulations to pass albeit the metaphorical shooting of our own feet. In the grand scheme of our 24 trillion dollar gross domestic product, 50 billion is a small price to pay in order to right our wrongs.

While some adjustments need to be made to allow for a more gradual phase out of coal, the legislation is sound in intention and necessary in practice. This decision is undoubtedly a sacrifice, similar to suffering from nicotine withdrawals to save our lungs from cancer. On any given day the decision to quit seems more trouble than it’s worth but a lifetime of procrastination will leave you terminally ill. Today it is imperative that we make sacrifices and invest in a future worth having before we cross an invisible line of no return.