See also <http://www.ucsusa.org/clean_energy/our-energy-choices/renewable-energy/public-benefits-of-renewable.html#.VP858vnF-So>

**US News and World Report Is There Really a War on Coal?**

Other energy industries employ more than the coal industry, and are better for the environment.

June 3, 2014 Jeff Nesbit

We’ve all heard the phrase “war on coal” so much in the past few years from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Mining Association, tea party groups supported by Koch Industries and various coal industry trade groups that most people think there are millions of coal jobs on the line in policy fights regarding renewable energy and climate issues.

The contours of that ”war on coal” narrative are now flying through media channels again in the wake of the EPA’s new clean power rules announced Monday. NMA has produced radio and TV ads reprising the “war on coal” narrative in a handful of states. Other industry groups will follow shortly. The National Republican Senatorial Committee started running phone “robocalls” in four states the same day the EPA rules were announced on what it called President Barack Obama’s “radical energy plan.”

So what is the fight over, really? What’s the truth?

The facts might surprise you. A century ago, there were more than 700,000 coal industry workers in America. But a lot has changed since the dawn of aviation, the Model T and World War I.

[The Washington Post’s WonkBlog](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/05/29/the-upcoming-political-fight-over-climate-change-by-the-numbers/) checked in with the Energy Information Administration on the number of coal jobs in the United States. Turns out, there are were about 89,000 people working in the coal industry in 2012, the most recent year available with statistics – and nearly half of them were concentrated in just two states, Kentucky and West Virginia.

Why do we hear so much from the GOP leadership in Congress about a “war on coal” when half of the coal jobs in the United States are concentrated in just two states? Simple, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, is from one of those two states – and he’s up for re-election in 2014 in a tough race in Kentucky.

So how many jobs are there on the clean power side of the equation – in places like the solar industry, the wind industry, nuclear power or less well-known renewable energy fields like geothermal?

The facts might surprise you here as well. As of November 2013, the American solar industry employed nearly 143,000 people, [according to the first ever census of solar jobs released a few weeks ago by the Solar Foundation](http://thesolarfoundation.org/research/national-solar-jobs-census-2013). That was nearly 24,000 more solar jobs than the previous year – a jump of 20 percent in just one year.

The outlines of the state versus state fight can be summed up in just a couple of numbers. There are more than 47,000 solar jobs in California alone – or roughly equivalent to the coal jobs in Kentucky and West Virginia. Kentucky gets 90 percent of its electricity from coal. California gets less than 1 percent of its power from coal, according to EIA.

Nationally, the facts on the ground are pretty straightforward. Coal jobs are trending downward, and solar jobs are sharply trending upwards. In just a few years, there will be twice as many solar jobs in the United States as coal jobs, and that’s just one part of the rapidly growing suite of renewable energy industries. [[**ALSO:**Coal Mining Deaths Preventable, Experts Say](http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/05/15/experts-coal-mining-deaths-preventable)]

This is one of several reasons why Barclay’s recently downgraded the utility sector’s high-grade bonds – because so many power companies continue to rely on coal even as the solar industry is exploding with innovation and job growth in America.

”In the 100-plus year history of the electric utility industry, there has never before been a truly cost-competitive substitute available for grid power,” Barclay’s credit team said. “We believe that solar plus storage could reconfigure the organization and regulation of the electric power business over the coming decade. We see near-term risks to credit from regulators and utilities falling behind the solar plus storage adoption curve and long-term risks from a comprehensive re-imagining of the role utilities play in providing electric power.”

This sort of battle has played out several times in America in just the past 20 years, and technology-driven innovation has won out over old ways of doing business in every instance. (Just ask any journalist who’s watched the transition from old to new media how this sort of rapid transformation works.)

While it’s true that about 40 percent of the country’s electricity comes from coal, that number is an average. Coal use for electricity is heavily concentrated in less than ten states – most of the country is below that average.

Just as one example - Wyoming gets 85 percent of its electricity from coal, and the state’s two Republican senators are outspoken critics of the EPA clean power rules. But neighboring Idaho now gets zero percent of its electricity from coal, according to the EIA.

And what about wind power jobs, compared to coal? This, too, might surprise you.

Largely because states like Iowa have learned how to harness the part of the country known as “wind alley” across the Midwest - more than 20 percent of Iowa’s electricity now comes from wind power - the number of jobs in the wind industry equals coal jobs nationally.

 According to reports at both the Bureau of Labor Statistics and trade groups, 85,000 American now work in wind energy and related industries – despite the fact that wind power only represents about 3.5 percent of U.S. power generation.

But, like solar, wind energy is growing rapidly, even as the coal industry is shrinking in the face of competitive challenges. New wind power generation has grown 20-fold in slightly more than a decade (from 3,000 megawatts of capacity in 2000 to 60,000 megawatts of capacity last year), according to BLS and the [American Wind Energy Association](http://www.awea.org/Resources/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=900).

And if solar and wind wasn’t enough of a comparison, the American nuclear power industry also employs many more workers than the coal industry. There are about 120,000 people employed by the commercial nuclear industry in the U.S.,[according to the Nuclear Energy Institute.](http://www.nei.org/Master-Document-Folder/Backgrounders/Fact-Sheets/Nuclear-Industry-s-Comprehensive-Approach-Develops)

Meanwhile, the miniscule geothermal power industry supports more than 13,000 jobs in the U.S., according to the[Geothermal Energy Association](http://www.geo-energy.org/pdf/reports/GreenJobs_Through_Geothermal_Energy_Final_Oct2010.pdf).

All told, clean power industries (solar, wind, nuclear and geothermal) now account for about 360,000 jobs in the U.S. – with two of these sectors exploding in both capacity and innovation. The coal industry employs 87,000, and is shrinking in the face of competition.

As the “war on coal” narrative comes back onstage - and as paid media campaigns start up in earnest around the EPA’s clean power rules – it will sometimes be difficult to sort out fact from fiction. But numbers don’t lie – and, in this case, the trends are pretty obvious.