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Guest column

It's time for MT to move off of coal

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I imagine a policy to end lung cancer that ignores the effects of smoking cigarettes; or a strategy to reduce childhood obesity which does nothing to change unhealthy eating. Ridiculous, right?

To any rational person, neither of those approaches makes sense. It is nonsensical to try to solve a problem while ignoring one of the major causes of that problem. Unfortunately, the state of Montana is taking exactly this approach when it comes to climate change policy. Gov. Steve Bullock's administration has put forward a plan to cut carbon pollution, while trying to sidestep the biggest cause of the problem: burning coal.

The Bullock administration is in the beginning stages of deciding how Montana will comply with new nationwide climate rules meant to reduce pollution from power generating stations, particularly coal-fired power plants. For the first time ever, the United States is taking significant action to curb the nation's worst polluters—and with some of the country's best renewable energy potential right here in Montana, this should be seen as an immense opportunity for our state.

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But rather than embrace a responsible transition off coal as renewable energy ramps up, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality has failed to present any plans that phase out existing coal power in Montana or end the export of Montana coal abroad. All five of the DEQ's proposed scenarios for complying with the federal rule fiddle around the edges of Montana's carbon footprint but ignore the real problem: we burn and export so much coal that it's cooking the global climate. Unless Montana addresses that issue, we will not deal with the root of the problem and we will not be part of a meaningful solution.

There are some good things in the DEQ's proposed scenarios. Some of them call for significantly ramping up renewable power while improving energy efficiency. But though the DEQ and the governor want to protect Montana from raging wildfires, devastating drought, polluted air and water and other impacts of climate change, they will fail if the impact of burning and exporting coal is ignored. It would be like hoping to avoid cancer, while smoking a pack of cigarettes every day.

What's even worse, one of the DEQ's proposed scenarios suggests solidifying Montana's coal dependence still further, by relying on expensive and largely untested "carbon capture and storage," or CCS, technology. CCS attempts to sequester carbon pollution from coal plants before it enters the atmosphere. Unfortunately, while it sounds good in theory, no U.S. power plant has yet managed to use CCS on a large scale, and the costs of the technology are immense.



Rather than tweaking our carbon footprint or gambling on untried technologies, Montana should get serious about shifting off coal. That means gradually phasing out coal-fired power plants and ending coal exports while aggressively ramping up

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renewables and helping affected communities transition to new job markets.

Will the shift away from coal be completely painless? No. It's going to take some work to ensure that communities which have grown up around coal plants are able to find new sources of employment. We need conversations that bring together policymakers, environmentalists, labor unions and other stakeholders to develop a responsible strategy, with the aim of moving off coal and securing a healthier future for everyone. It's not always going to be easy. But by ignoring the problem and failing to start the conversation now, our policymakers are doing us a grave disservice.

Addressing climate change can be an immense opportunity for Montana, creating new jobs in renewables and clean energy development. However, to embrace this opportunity fully, we need to get real about the problem. Coal is the biggest contributor to climate change and we need a responsible plan to get away from it. It's time our elected representatives came to grips with this reality.

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