

THE COAL STOPS HERE



I'm usually skeptical of absolutes. But not when it comes to coal. Remember that Edwin Starr classic that Springsteen revived in the '80s? "War, huh, yeah. What is it good for? *Absolutely nothing!*"

In just about every way, that's how I feel about coal, which is why I was so excited when Bloomberg Philanthropies donated \$50 million to the Sierra Club this summer to help us move America beyond coal.

The Club's Beyond Coal campaign started modestly nine years ago, when government officials proposed building more than 150 coal-fired power plants across the country.

Believing it would be almost impossible to oppose all those plants at the same time, Club volunteers and staff mobilized against just two of them, and won. We took the lessons learned from these early battles to train more volunteers and staff to oppose a couple of dozen more proposed plants.

We won the majority of those battles too, but discovered to our dismay that every time we scored a victory against coal in one community, new proposals cropped up for plants in other locations. To prevent dirty coal from being locked in as a dominant energy source for another half century or more, we made defeating these plants our top priority, mobilizing the power of our chapter activists, lawyers, energy experts, and supporters like you as part of a national coalition of grassroots organizations in almost every state across the country.

Coal mining has always been a dirty, dangerous business, but mountaintop removal takes the devastation to new lows. After blowing up more than 500 mountains to uncover coal seams in Appalachia, mining companies have dumped millions of tons of waste into the valleys below, permanently burying more than 2,000 miles of streams, poisoning drinking water, and wiping out entire communities.

Twenty-five million Americans have asthma. If, like me, you're a parent, you probably know that children are most affected.

My kids thankfully do not have asthma, but nationally 1 in 10 children do, and coal-fired plants are a primary contributor to their misery.

It gets worse: Every year, soot from coal-fired power plants kills an estimated 13,000 Americans prematurely and is responsible for \$100 billion in healthcare costs. Old, outdated coal plants are also the single biggest source of mercury pollution, which causes birth defects and developmental damage in young children.

After coal is burned, the leftover toxic ash is dumped in thousands of poorly regulated sites nationwide. Even though it contains arsenic, lead, cadmium, and other heavy metals, the ash is regulated almost as if it were household garbage.

These poisons spill or seep into the ground and contaminate drinking water.

Finally, coal plants are our largest source of greenhouse gas emissions. Every ton of coal burned generates three tons of carbon dioxide pollution. The 150 new coal-fired power plants proposed in 2002 would have emitted an estimated 585 million tons of CO₂ pollution annually for the next 50 years.

Here's the good news: Thanks to a combination of community organizing, strategic communications, and aggressive litigation, we stopped those 150 plants and more.

Our once-tiny campaign has grown into one of the most effective environmental efforts in history despite fierce opposition from the influential and well-funded coal lobby. Countering those deep pockets took all the passion and commitment we could muster.

Now, though, the playing field has been leveled a bit. The generous gift from Bloomberg Philanthropies is recognition of how much we've achieved and a challenge to go further. Besides stopping new coal-fired plants from being built, we can clean up or shut down the existing fleet of deadly plants. Equally important, we can advance the solutions, like solar and wind power that will protect our air and water and offer enduring well-paying jobs. This really is the beginning of a clean-energy transition.

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