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Coal curriculum

What is the state teaching children about coal?

BY PATRICK YEAGLE



Illinois is a coal state – the eighth-largest producer of coal in the nation at 33.2 million tons in 2010, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. The Illinois Geological Survey estimates Illinois coal holds more energy potential than all of Saudi Arabia's and Kuwait's oil reserves combined. It makes sense that the state would want to promote one of its most abundant resources. But one anti-coal Illinois group says the state is misleading schoolchildren about the environmental impact of coal.

The Heartland Coalfield Alliance, a coalition of several Illinois environmental groups, gathered in Springfield on May 3, protesting outside the offices of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. The object of the protesters' ire is a school curriculum titled "From the Coal Mines to the Power Lines," which DCEO offers free of charge to Illinois schools. While DCEO says the curriculum is mandated under state law, the alliance claims it paints a rosy picture of coal mining, pollution and the coal industry.

"Fundamentally, the issue here is DCEO is taking taxpayer money and basically spending it to misinform our schoolchildren for the private gain of the coal industry," said Brian Perbix, a grassroots organizer with the Prairie Rivers Network.

DCEO spokeswoman Marcelyn Love points to a state law passed in 2006 that requires the agency to create and distribute information promoting Illinois coal to school-age children, among other groups. The law earmarks 1/64th of the state's utility excise tax, paid by utility customers, for promotion of coal.

"We believe that's a priority that needs to be changed," Perbix says.

Love estimated the cost of the curriculum to be somewhere near \$50,000.

The curriculum consists of different lesson plans targeted at students in kindergarten through fourth grade, fifth grade through eighth grade, and ninth grade through 12th grade. It includes specific lessons on science, social studies, and mathematics, and includes hands-on projects and questions that reinforce skills like solving algebraic word problems.

The lessons specifically address responsibility to restore land to usefulness and respecting community wishes. For example, the K-4 curriculum touts the importance of cleaning up after oneself, stating "once the coal has been extracted, the land needs to be put back neatly or made into something better."

But Perbix says that doesn't reflect the reality of coal mining in Illinois, which the Heartland Coalfield Alliance characterizes as a "burden" of environmental destruction and adverse health effects.

"In hundreds of pages, DCEO's curriculum fails to mention coal's devastating impacts on clean water in Illinois, including massive habitat destruction from coal mines, harmful pollution in mine wastewater, and leaking coal ash dumps at power plants that are polluting rivers, streams and groundwater across the state," Perbix said. "Illinois' communities have borne the burden of coal pollution for far too long. Our kids deserve to hear the truth."

DCEO says it's in the early stages of updating the curriculum, with a finished product expected in December. Perbix said the Heartland Coalfield Alliance has offered to work with the agency to correct what the alliance deems "misinformation" in the curriculum.

It's not the first time lesson plans regarding coal have come under fire by environmental groups. In 2011, educational publisher Scholastic dropped its "United States of Energy" curriculum, which was funded by the American Coal Foundation, after the curriculum was criticized for not including information on negative aspects of coal power.

At the protest event in Springfield on May 3, organizers attempted to deliver petitions against the curriculum to DCEO offices, but were denied entry to the building, according to Perbix. During a similar protest at DCEO's Chicago office the previous day, protesters were allowed to deliver petitions and meet with a DCEO representative, Perbix says.

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