



Fall 2006

Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future, by Jeff Goode

Amy Williams

Recommended Citation

Amy Williams, *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future*, by Jeff Goode, 46 Nat. Resources J. 1090 (2006).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol46/iss4/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sahrk@unm.edu.

Almost no basin studied in the book represents a conflict-prone political situation with the exception of the West Bank and Gaza. Despite the desperate state of affairs that currently exists in the region due to the supply-induced scarcities (semi-arid area with over-exploited and polluted groundwater resources); demand-induced scarcities (a rapidly growing population of Palestinians and a continuous influx of Israeli settlers to the region); and, more important, structural scarcities (inequitable distribution and discriminatory allocation of the resources between Israeli settlements and Palestinian towns under the Israeli occupation since 1967), the author puts forward ambitious suggestions for achieving sustainable development in the water sector. However, the suggestion of the author to mobilize joint technical experts (i.e., lawyers, engineers, and economists) to enhance and improve international cooperation does not seem to be feasible without a conducive political climate in the region.

Even though the editors underline the significance of the HELP program in solving water issues in these selected basins, interestingly only two (the San Pedro and Aral Sea basins) out of eleven case studies presented in the book explicitly mention the contributions and the links to the HELP initiative. Nevertheless, almost all chapters in the book include descriptive or analytical subsections that demonstrate how the gaps between hydrology, water law, and management are actually bridged in practice.

From the case studies described above, it is observed that, despite the immense challenges in water resources management all around the world, IWRM is upheld and is actually evolving from theory to practice through a joint approach encompassing water science, law, and policy. Thus, the book's overall objective to operationalize a truly multidisciplinary approach to the effective management of national and international watercourses is noteworthy.

Aysegul Kibaroglu
Department of International Relations
Middle East Technical University
Ankara, Turkey

Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future. By Jeff Goodell. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006. Pp. 324, \$25.95.

Jeff Goodell builds his 2006 book *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future* on hands-on, non-academic research and enjoyable prose. Since Goodell is also a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone* and a contributor to *New York Times Magazine*, the book takes the same fast-paced, easy tone of good journalism, which makes the book a pleasure to read. Goodell builds the story around colorful characters but

is careful to at least cursorily explain complex principles of environmental law, policy, and science.

Nevertheless, *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future* will disappoint those who pay attention to natural resources extraction in the United States, as the book reveals no secrets at all. Goodell cleverly organizes the book, tracing the coal cycle from "The Dig," which covers mining and transportation, to "The Burn," with consequent environmental health and economic effects to workers and communities, and finally to "The Heat," which focuses on climate change. Each section reveals nothing new to anyone who lives in a state that hosts natural resources extraction or supports a coal-fired power plant or those who have investigated coal mining the slightest bit. Rather, Goodell illustrates clearly what the informed reader already knows: coal mining and burning is a filthy business that ravages workers, communities, state economies, and, ultimately, the global atmosphere. That this is common knowledge is especially disheartening considering that policy makers continue to fast-track new coal-fired power plants and Americans continue to rely on the rock.

For the uninitiated, *Big Coal* still succeeds as an excellent primer in the process of coal mining and use and its often disastrous environmental consequences. For example, *Big Coal* deftly manages the line between too much and too little information regarding complicated scientific principles. Those who are bewildered by science will be pleased to read Goodell's straightforward explanations of the Clean Air Act, global warming, and technological alternatives to the current method of burning coal.

I was particularly impressed by Goodell's handling of the Clean Air Act's New Source Review provisions, which are confusing even to those of us who have studied them. But Goodell smartly eschews explaining New Source Review in legal or scientific terms. Instead, he steers clear of the technical jargon that makes the Clean Air Act inaccessible. Rather, Goodell exercises a stair-step approach to science that allows the reader to digest the information slowly, without missing critical information that is required to understand the issue.

Goodell also analyzes admirably the alternatives to the current method of coal burning. For example, he treats clearly the complicated and developing technology of integrated gasification combined cycle plants (IGCC). IGCC are an alternative wherein, rather than directly burning coal, the facility uses heat and pressure to remove impurities from the coal to produce synthetic fuel. The fuel is then burned in turbines to produce energy. (Frankly, the only reason that I can give that brief and simple explanation of IGCC is because of the explanation provided by *Big Coal*.) Goodell takes the technical analysis one step

further and discusses the economic and political hurdles to establishing IGCC, which are cleaner and more efficient than traditional coal-fired power plants. IGCC is just one example of Goodell's method for addressing alternatives. He gives a clear and approachable explanation of an alternative, the obstacles to integrating the alternative, and the results we might expect if the alternative succeeds. His method is admirably concise and can prepare even the most uninformed for discussion about coal.

However, *Big Coal* does not speak to the audience that is truly responsible for making the decisions about America's energy future. It is neither the lovers of coal nor the haters that will ultimately decide the fate of the coal industry. Rather, as we have seen increasingly in recent electoral cycles, it is the undecided middle that will determine what energy sources the country pursues in the coming years. Unfortunately, Goodell's tone may be too strong to appeal to those in the middle. Goodell is not coy about his position on coal: he hates it and thinks that you should hate it too. He equates America's relationship with coal to the addiction of drug users. As such, Goodell may be written off as being too alarmist, as, he ironically notes, environmentalists often are.

Goodell balances that criticism by respectfully discussing those whose lives are determined by coal, which provides the personal element that illustrates the human cost of coal. For example, Goodell capitalizes on the recent sympathy toward coal miners that has developed as a result of catastrophic coal mining accidents in recent years. That sympathy may endear Goodell to his readers, as it is clear that he truly appreciates the work and sacrifice of coal miners and their families. Further, Goodell treats those in mining communities whose property and health has suffered as a result of mining operations with dignity. These moments remind the reader that a decision about America's energy future is ultimately a decision about America's values. Goodell provides an engaging foundation from which to analyze those values.

Amy Williams

BA, St. John's College, Santa Fe, NM, 2003

2008 JD Candidate, University of New Mexico School of Law