Coalfield Listening Project Highlights

CENTER FOR COALFIELD JUSTICE
Acknowledgements

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In November 2014, the Center for Coalfield Justice (CCJ) launched the Coalfield Listening Project. Over the course of eight months, we interviewed thirty people in rural, southwestern Pennsylvania to learn about the lived experiences of people in our region, particularly their experiences with fossil fuel industries. We hoped to find out what people want for the future; a future that looks uncertain for the energy industries that currently drive the region’s economy. We planned to share these answers with other people who live in our region and use this information to guide our work to start working together to solve the problems that we face and build a better future.

The Center for Coalfield Justice is a southwestern Pennsylvania nonprofit, membership organization with a mission to “improve policy and regulations for the oversight of fossil fuel extraction and use; to educate, empower and organize coalfield citizens; and to protect public and environmental health.” CCJ has with nearly two thousand members and supporters, most of whom live in Washington and Greene counties where they live with the daily impacts of coal mining and shale gas drilling.

For over 20 years, CCJ has been fighting for Environmental Justice, a vision of the world where everyone lives in a safe, healthy environment, regardless of their race or income. We distinguish Environmental Justice, focused on people and communities, from Environmentalism, focused on protecting nature through conservation efforts. We believe in a blend of these ideals where a healthy environment is the foundation for people to live harmoniously with nature. CCJ’s vision for a future is one in which communities in Washington and Greene Counties are thriving; where people have healthy, safe places to live and jobs that don’t threaten their health, divide their communities, or degrade the environment.

Our region’s economy is heavily dependent on fossil fuel industries. In Greene County, twenty-seven percent of all jobs are in coal mining, gas drilling, and related industries. At CCJ, we believe that we must urgently begin transitioning our region’s economy away from dependence on coal mining and fracking. The long-term, economic viability of both the coal and natural gas industries is unclear and in danger since they rely on fossil fuels, which are a finite resource. These industries are problematic, not only because of their boom and bust economic cycles and unpredictability, but also because coal mining and fracking are polluting the air, destroying water supplies, tearing up farmland, and displacing communities in Washington and Greene Counties. At the same time, we realize how many people work in these industries. We know that coal and gas jobs put food on the table for thousands of people in our region. We want to build alternatives to these industries now, so that we do not have to choose between jobs and healthy communities, and so that we are all ready for a future without coal and gas.

When change comes to this region, we want to ensure that the community is leading that change. We believe that lasting social change must be driven by the most impacted people and our goal with the Coalfield Listening Project was to start creating a community-based vision for this future.

**What is the Coalfield Listening Project?**

A “listening project” is a type of survey that asks open-ended questions and relies on in-depth interviews to collect information, explore the complexity of how people feel about an issue and compile stories from their lives. Our goal was not to learn whether this should happen, but rather how it should happen from local people. The aim of this project was not to conduct a public opinion poll about these issues generally, but to seek out the stories of the specific ways in which these industries are impacting people and generate ideas for how to solve social, economic, and other problems that our region faces.
About the Participants

None of the participants were currently employed in either the coal industry or the gas industry. One participant had previously worked in the natural gas industry, while another had previously worked in the coal industry. At least two other participants had family members who worked in the gas industry.

Coalfield Listening Project Highlights

We have organized these highlights into four sections, based on the four main categories of questions, describing themes and providing excerpts from interviews to create a curated collection of stories. We chose to keep all participants anonymous in this report. We removed names and other identifying information, only using pseudonyms (denoted with an asterisk) occasionally.
Positive Attributes

We began each interview with two inquiries: “Tell me about the place where you live,” and “What do you value about your community?”. Two major themes emerged, (17/30, 57%) said that people and community were a key, positive attribute of the place where they live, while an even larger percentage of people (20/30, 67%) identified the rural lifestyle and landscape as attributes they enjoyed.

People and Community

When asked what she valued about the place where she lived, one participant said immediately, “The people. The most important thing is our people.” Many participants described a deep sense of community and belonging. One person said, “It’s always been a really close-knit community right in here...I like living in a small community where you pretty much know everybody.” For some who have a long history of family roots in the region, these bonds are enduring connections. “There are generational friendships between families here,” one participant said.

The sense of community was also grounded in being able to rely on neighbors. One participant said, “I just like how close everybody is. If you need something, you just go to your neighbors and you know they’re gonna help you out with what you need. It’s nice to know that people are there for you.”

A number of participants shared stories of moving away from the region and choosing to come back because of relationships here and the sense of community. One participant summed up these sentiments by saying,

I’ve been so many places where I feel a loss of the personal and real community intimacy. And that may sound strange, but I value heavily the lives of others and the way that communities communicate has been lost over the years. The way that they do business has changed...I value the ideas of family and friendship, borrowing cups of sugar, borrowing a few eggs, and that happens still where I’m living.

“The people. The most important thing is our people.”
Participants also described feeling connected to the land. One woman said simply, “I value nature. That’s why I live here.” Another participant described it this way, “Everybody loves the land. They can’t leave it...I notice it even in the simple comments that people make about the birds that they’ve seen. These are gruff old farmers, you know.” She went on to tell a story about one of her neighbors,

One gentlemen a couple ridges over...was commenting one time about the trees, and I said, ‘You can tell what kinds of trees these are even when they’re not in leaf?’ And he says, ‘Well sure, these are locusts, that’s red oak, that’s tulip poplar.’ He just went around the whole field and named the varieties of trees. That kind of connection to the land is really nice.

Many participants said that they cherished the peace and quiet that came with living in a rural place. When asked what she valued about the place where she lived, one participant said, “The peacefulness. You can’t see no neighbors where I live. I like the privacy that I have.”

We interviewed a man, David*, at his Greene County farm in the early spring. For David, who’s “been there, done that”, no amount of money would convince him to give up the land he loves and the quiet life he has made there. Despite receiving very high offers from oil and gas companies for years to buy or lease his property for gas drilling, he has turned them down every time. When asked why he has not sold, he said,

“It’s just money. It’s only money. No, it just doesn’t really matter. The place is paid for, understand that...everything’s paid for...I drove truck all my life. I’ve been to forty-eight states. I’ve been to British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and I stepped across the border into Mexico just to say I’d been there. So I’m not gonna buy a camper to travel. I’ve been to South Dakota when it was forty below zero, California when it was 110. I have pictures from Snoqualmie Pass where I’m standin’ on top of the trailer and you can’t see over the snow bank. I’ve been there and done that. I started when the interstate system wasn’t done. Donner Pass on Labor Day one year was closed for ice. So, I mean, I just want to be home, and grilled cheese and tomato soup’s fine with me...peanut butter and jelly. So it’s a lifestyle, you know.”

*Photo Credit: Pete Zapadaka
Problems & Concerns

Participants talked much more readily about the problems in their communities and we heard a wide-ranging list of problems. Participants spoke about poverty, racism, poor political leadership, loss of local farms, climate change, and the lack of cell phone and Internet service. However, three problems came up more consistently than any others. Forty percent (12/30) of participants said that drugs were a major problem. Another 40 percent (12/30) said that population loss was a serious problem, and an overwhelming majority—77 percent (23/30)—were concerned about a number of problems related to fracking.

Drugs

Some participants considered drugs to be the biggest problem in the area. People described how their communities had been shaken by the loss of several young people to heroin overdoses in recent years. One woman reflected on it, saying, “It’s horrible. Absolutely horrible. You know that’s the big issue. It’s drugs. I can think of three young kids who’ve overdosed in the last year and died... Heroin’s the killer... It’s the biggest problem in the area, in my mind anyway.” A young person we interviewed had watched some of her peers get involved with drugs. She said, “It is bad. There’s been people around my age that I’ve had to go to their funerals. Which is hard....” Another woman told us about going to a funeral for the son of a close friend who had overdosed on heroin.

One participant, who was in his late twenties, described how things had changed over the years, “It has always been a problem. But it has gotten worse... The hard stuff was not here, at least not when I was in high school.” He believed that more drugs had come into the area with the arrival of the gas industry, but another participant thought that jobs in the gas industry were helping drug problems. She said, “I think the work has helped honestly. Most companies drug test. So people can’t get away with it.”

The most common explanation participants gave for the rise in drug use was that young people had very little to do outside of school. “People around here, they see it as we have nothing to do, so they go out and party all of the time. And that just leads to them doing drugs,” said one woman. One participant described how she saw drug use increase when extracurricular programs were cut at West Greene High School. Another woman said, “This is just my personal philosophy, but back when everyone farmed the area—truly farmed—the kids were on the farm. They had things to do. They had 4H projects. They did things. And now with both parents working, the kids sit in front of the TV. They don’t have anything to do.”

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Population Loss

Several participants were deeply troubled by the number of people leaving the region, in many cases, after the coal industry purchased their properties. Coal companies are required, by law, to repair damage to people’s homes and water supplies caused by subsidence from mining. In recent years, it seems the companies have found it more cost-effective to simply purchase people’s properties and move them out before mining starts or after damage occurs. This is especially common in western Greene County, where a majority of our participants lived, and where the coal industry now owns a huge share of properties which have been left abandoned.

One participant, who eventually sold her home to the mining company, told the story of being undermined, explaining

*We lost our water...It was a spring and you could run a car wash off of it, but I was totally blown away by the fact that the [mining machine] went through at approximately 3:00 and at 3:30 our water was gone. Nothing. Yeah it was totally gone...I did a lot of hiking in the areas behind our house and nothing. No water anywhere. The streams were totally gone. And I was like, wow, the devastation is just incredible.*

Luckily, she was able to purchase another property nearby and stay in the area. Others simply move out of the region. One participant said that her cousins moved out-of-state after the company bought their property because there were no other properties available. She described local real estate issues,

*Around here property’s either really really expensive because people want the prices that the coal company offers, or the coal company owns it...[After you’ve been bought out] it’s hard to find someplace to stay around here that you can afford without spending everything you just got. And especially with land for a farm. It’s really hard.*

The loss of population has eroded the tax base in the area. In many cases, the coal companies tear down the homes on the properties they buy, significantly reducing their taxes on those properties, but raising taxes for the people who remain. One participant put it this way, “*[The coal company] comes in, buys up everything, takes what it wants, then leaves the scene and just leaves these houses to be burned down and taken off the tax rolls.*”

One effect of these combined issues is that the West Greene School District cannot maintain the type of programming it once did for its students with a smaller tax base and fewer students. One man described how much things had changed since he was in high school in the 1960s, when there were 1,100-1,200 students in the school district and now there are about 700-800 students in the same district. He explained, “*When you get down into a school system that’s only putting 50-60 kids out a year, there’s no variety to the subjects you can take and you can’t afford to bring in a full, major certified teacher to teach.*”

In just a decade, the West Greene School District lost over 30% of its student body.

The coal companies’ land grab is pulling apart the social fabric of western Greene County. It is taking away the very things that our participants said they love about the region: land and community. A young woman summed up the concerns echoed by many of our participants by saying,

*I’m worried that we’re not gonna be able to live in the area anymore because there’s not gonna be anything here. That’s my biggest thing. I don’t wanna move out of the area, but...the coal companies already bought a lot of the area up...And so they’re just changing everything and I’m worried that... they’re gonna push everybody out. They already tried to buy up ours but we didn’t sell. There’s no place else I really wanna go. But if they take everything, what do you do?*
Participants most commonly cited the impacts of fracking as problems. Chief among their concerns was the issue of truck traffic as thousands of trucks crisscross the region every day hauling heavy equipment as well as water, sand, and chemicals needed for the hydraulic fracturing process. “I never thought I would see so many trucks in my life...There are times when we cannot get out on the road because 15 water trucks are coming down the road,” said one participant. Another participant said he felt surrounded, “My house has roads on both sides, and the trucks are constantly going past and sometimes cutting into my yard. It is like the industry is circling in, like a pack of wolves.”

People complained about the noise, dust, and fumes created by the trucks. One participant said, “We feel like we are living in the dust bowl; there is dust on everything.” Another participant described the fumes, “You get your pollution in the air from all these engines running and they’ll sit on these roads—15-20 of them at a time in convoys—and they’re all running their engines all the time. It’s sickening really.” She also described the toll of the trucks on rural roads not built to handle such heavy traffic. She stated, “The roads are in horrible shape. Horrible shape. You can lose a car in some of those potholes. Literally. We have areas that are so sunken in on our roads; these are main highways, mind you. Don’t even go to the back roads.”

Beyond well pads, natural gas infrastructure like processing plants, compressor stations and pipelines are being constructed across the region. One participant described what it is like to watch a pipeline go in,

They start a little dirt path here. Then, the next day it’s a double dirt path. Then, the next day trees are going down. Then, you see trees haulin’ out. Then, it’s a big wide swath. Yeah, it’s makin’ me sick to my stomach. I get angry as I’m ridin’ these roads and just lookin’ around at the destruction...They’re wiping out hillsides. Acres and acres and acres.

A number of participants were concerned about the possibility of water contamination from fracking—to the point that they no longer trusted the safety of their water. One man was worried that the fracking wastewater impoundment up the hill from him might leak into the aquifer that supplies his water. He explained, -

[At] the well up on the hill, [the company] took the tailings and put them in a lined pit. They put rocks as big as this table on top and smoothed dirt over it. You can’t tell me those rocks are not going to pierce the liners and leak into our water supply. We don’t drink our water.

Others had witnessed, firsthand, surface water pollution caused by fracking. One woman described what she saw when she was driving home one day,

It’s pouring down rain...The water’s running down the roads everywhere. On one side of the road is a gas well site. On the other side of the road is a creek—a fairly wide-running creek. A very pretty, nice stream, used to be. And there’s cattle in the field there. And here’s all this white sludge just running across the road, down right into the creek from the gas well...And it was running as fast as it was raining. And I thought, you gotta be kidding me. I wouldn’t eat a fish out of one of these creeks and rivers and ponds around here if you paid me to...I don’t even know if we’ve got any fish left living.

Other participants mourned the gas industry’s impact on the land. One man described what happened to his great-grandfather’s farm,

My great aunt leased the land out to gas drilling and it tore up that whole farm. It was pristine farmland, in my opinion. It would have been nice to just keep it as a farm. But there’s three or four pads on that 80 acres. And, to this day, I’ve never spoken to her. And I won’t.

The quiet, rural landscape that participants valued so highly had undergone dramatic changes. One young man shared the feeling of loss after the first well was drilled in the area,

I remember going out to spend the night with my mom and dad, the first time that site was there. I’d gone to bed and I had my window open. And I said what’s all the noise, you know, it felt like I was in town. And I said, oh my God, it’s that [gas well] and it was lit up so bright. And there’s my dad sitting on the porch in tears...There aren’t even any words to describe how you feel whenever you see a man who has almost killed himself to have what little bit he does and try to take care of it as best he can, and then, now he knows that just at any time they can just take it away from him and destroy it.

Photo courtesy of Bob Donnan
In order to gauge perceptions of the economy, we asked participants to rate job opportunities on a scale of one to ten—one representing no good local jobs, and ten representing plenty of good local jobs.

Almost everyone we interviewed had something to say about how the gas industry has impacted the economy and many people believed that job opportunities were better now than in the recent past due to the natural gas industry. We will also look at the state of agriculture in the region. Although it is a relatively minor industry, almost half of participants (14/30 or 47%) mentioned agriculture when we asked about the economy.
Natural Gas

Despite all of the problems with the gas industry described above, no one denied that it has brought economic benefits to the region. Landowners are collecting royalties from the gas being drilled under their properties. “It’s making people rich. It’s making people that have never had money before, millionaires,” said one participant. A number of participants were themselves collecting royalties from drilling, even though they had misgivings about the industry.

Most people we interviewed had a friend or loved one who worked in the gas industry. One woman put it this way, “There’s good and bad to everything...It’s giving people jobs...you can’t really hate the people, all the people that’s doing it. They’re making a paycheck to feed their children.” There was a sense from many participants that jobs in the gas industry were abundant, one woman said, “Everywhere I go, I see signs for jobs.”

Jackie* was the only person we interviewed who had worked in the gas industry and she had just been laid off by a water hauling company. Her experiences contrasted with some of the hype about gas industry jobs. She described her experiences,

I was a manifold attendant. The trucks would come in to get loaded or unloaded. I signed them in. Put the cones out. Make sure they listen to me. Did what I told them to do...[I did that for] six months...[Before that] I worked for two security companies. The first one was a good company to work for and...they lost the contract to some cheap ass company from New Jersey. I was makin’ 11.50 an hour and this new company paid me 10 bucks an hour, which was not bad, until they cut my hours. I went from workin’ 60-70 hours a week to working three days one week and two days the next. Not enough money. So I had to go find something else and that’s when I found [the water transfer job]...I loved my job. Didn’t love the people, but I loved my job...They said if you want more hours you got to go up to Dubois. I worked seven days a week, 12-hour shifts. That’s how it was.

For Jackie, work in the industry failed to offer high wages, or job security. At one point she was making only $10 an hour working night shifts, and she had been through three different jobs in only a few years. After her hours were cut, she had to take a job five counties away from her home to have full-time work. Then, within six months, she was laid off.

Another participant said this about job security in the gas industry,

Your job is not guaranteed. That industry is great for making money but it’s short-lived with most people. You could have a job today and gone next week. They decide they don’t want you, they wanna cut off one more truck off their load...That’s a very very high-risk job as far as job security.

Some participants also noted that there was a lack of gender equality in the industry. Women simply do not have the same opportunities as men, said some. One young woman, Andrea*, put it this way.

There’s jobs I could get around here without going to school, but they aren’t like, good jobs, where I could make a decent amount of money. They’re mostly just, for women, maybe 10 dollars an hour. And I want to be able to support myself without having to rely on anybody else...There’s very few women that...are working out there. I mean, I’m sure if they wanted to, they probably could, but it would just be hard, a hard environment for anybody.... I’m sure I could do the work; I don’t doubt that. But it’s gonna be mostly guys.... I feel like they would just look down on you and make it hard on you to be one of the few women that are out there, trying to do the same thing that they are.

Andrea gave two numbers when she rated job opportunities, “I would say for males it’s probably a good 8 for the amount of jobs...I would say 4-5 for women.”
Farming in Greene and Washington counties is no longer the major industry it was years ago. One participant recalled the thriving farming economy that he grew up with in the 1950s,

In those little villages and communities out here 15-20 miles west of Waynesburg here, it’s a lot of open country. It used to be farming: sheep, cattle. And you know some of the older boys, that’s how they lived. Had their hogs, chickens and what not. But now that has seemed to go by the wayside, because Greene County forty years ago used to be a heck of a producer of wool. They had a tremendous amount of sheep...I doubt if we have right now 2,000 head of sheep in Greene County. Where years ago, one farmer would have 3,000 head. And then the cattle...The dairy farmers...some of them would be a quarter mile apart...so there you got 6-8 dairy farmers in a two mile stretch. Today, they’re gone.

In Greene and Washington counties, farmers have to contend with the impacts of coal mining and fracking in addition to the inherent challenges of small farming. Both industries encroach upon farmland and damage the water supplies that farmers need for their animals and crops.

One farmer described the impact on a farm when water supplies are damaged by mine subsidence, “There’s no putting that water table back. There’s no putting these damaged streams back...I have been on farms where the water’s been lost and that really ends once and for all the future use of that land.” She went on to describe the loss of community when a coal company bought a number of farms in her area, “Farmers were pushed out who I did business with, who helped me, who sold me hay. Now I have to go further for it...There are fewer people I can consult now. There’s a smaller farming community.”

One woman we interviewed, Elizabeth*, had just declared bankruptcy on the farm that she and her husband ran for 10 years. A number of factors contributed to them going out of business. The final straw, however, came when her landlord leased the land they were renting to a pipeline company. She shared the history of their farm’s decline, saying,

My husband bought a used greenhouse and he put it up at his parent’s house on top of our market garden. And got started...He had just gotten through his first season, had money in the bank account. So I said I’d quit [my job] and we’ll do the business together. And that’s what we did and it went really well until 2010. Winter of 2010-11, when we had “snowmageddon” we lost two buildings that year—nearly lost our business. If it wasn’t for the USDA farm services industry propping us up, we probably would have lost our business and we probably should have lost our business that year. Because what happened then is because we couldn’t repay our debts and we had to have a lot of unexpected expenditures as far as having to rebuild those buildings...

The following year, our landlords had us move because they decided to rent out to [a pipeline company].... [That] year was really tough because we had spent a lot of money moving the business and trying to get set up again. And then my daughter was old enough to go back to kindergarten, and I said that’s it, I’m going back to work. I cannot do this to myself anymore, to my kids anymore. Winters were nightmarish to try to get through them.... So, I went back to work at the dealership. He tried to stick it out for another year and just wasn’t able to turn a profit. We just had too much debt. So we declared bankruptcy this year and closed the business down. But you know, gotta say you tried.

Elizabeth’s story painfully illustrates just how hard it is to be a farmer in Greene County. But even she was not ready to write off farming in the region completely, saying, “There is still a decent farming community...People making it a go. Definitely beef industry is doing well. Lamb industry is doing well.”
We concluded each interview by asking the following: What do you hope for the future of this region? We wanted to tap into people’s imaginations with our final question. We wanted people to think beyond what seems possible right now, and describe what they want for our region.

The most consistent theme in participants’ responses, however, was that they struggled to think of an answer. One woman said that she did not feel like she had the luxury of time to think ahead into the future, “This area’s all working class people, we’re all so busy with our lives, it’s hard to give the attention to this that we need.”

Many people expressed a feeling of hopelessness. Perhaps the most revealing answer was,

*I don’t know. I don’t know how to answer that question. That’s sad when you can’t think of anything beyond the destruction [caused by fracking].... So what’s that tell you? That’s how bad it is. I don’t.I don’t see a future. I don’t see what it could be that would actually change things.... That’s the harshness of it.*

For others, under the hopelessness was a sense of determination and loyalty to the area. One woman described how, even if she did not believe things could change, she could not imagine giving up on the region. She said,

*In spite of the powerlessness I sometimes feel, in terms of what they’re doing to this county, I feel ownership, like, they can’t do that and they’re not gonna do that to us.... I just feel like I have a duty to stay here because of the connections I have.... I feel obligated to make some sort of stand and not abandon it.*

As people moved past the initial surprise associated with the question, it became clear that participants absolutely had visions for the future. The ideas that came up most consistently for diversifying and transitioning the economy were renewable energy and local agriculture. Only 20 percent (6/30) mentioned renewable energy, while 27 percent (8/30) discussed local agriculture, yet participants offered the most concrete ideas in these two areas.

“In spite of the powerlessness I sometimes feel, in terms of what they’re doing to this county, I feel ownership, like, they can’t do that and they’re not gonna do that to us.... I just feel like I have a duty to stay here because of the connections I have.... I feel obligated to make some sort of stand and not abandon it.”
Renewable Energy

For a number of people we interviewed, renewable energy production was an obvious way to transition away from fossil fuel extraction. Participants spoke primarily about wind and solar energy. One man said,

“I’d like to see it go from fossil fuels to solar and wind and water and all that. I mean, it almost seems like if they closed the coal mines down and built some kind of factories that would produce solar panels or wind turbines or whatever and just changeover to all that. I mean, somebody has to make the stuff. It doesn’t need to be made overseas or anything. It needs to be made right here, right here in Greene County. If you’re gonna use it here, you should make it here, is what I think. And do away with all the other stuff.”

Participants were very clear that this kind of transition must be fair for the workers currently in the fossil fuel industries. One man said this about coal and gas workers, “These people need to be the first in line if we develop these renewable forms of energy. These people need to be the people who are trained to do these things.”

One participant was a former coal miner, Jason*, and he was pessimistic about the future of the coal industry. He supported the idea of creating jobs in renewable energy. He insisted that, not only do miners need to be given these jobs, but that they would excel at them. He said,

“Jason believed it would take major, state-level policy efforts, crafted by good leaders with the interests of workers at heart, for renewable energy gain a foothold.

Another participant agreed. He said, “You need to have, first of all, a government that is open-minded enough to start moving the community in that direction...You need visionaries like this who know that we need to get away from fossil fuels.”

Farming and Agriculture

In the previous section, we highlighted how challenging it is to run a small farm in this region. As one farmer put it, “It’s very, very difficult. You have to be committed. Like crazily committed.” Still, agriculture came up most consistently when participants talked about the industries they wanted to see grow in the region. One younger woman spoke about her dream to take over her family’s farm and see more farms in the region start up again.

“I definitely would like to have our farm, if I can, when it comes to that time... If we could get more farms back in this area; get some of the dairies that have shut down back up and running. Stuff like that. Get the farms expanded to growing more, raising more animals, where they can actually be sustainable and make a decent living for the people running them. I would love to see that.”

In order to expand the farming industry, new farmers who do not come from farm families need land. However, there are very few properties with farming potential available, especially in western Greene County where the coal companies hold huge amounts of acreage. One farmer, Denise*, suggested that this land should be leased for agriculture,

“I was gonna talk to [the coal company] about some sort of initiative to put back into production some of this land that they own that is not being farmed anymore. Some of it is certainly being mowed for hay, but beyond that it is not being used to capacity. And if you ran animals on it, in an intensive grazing program, you would begin to enhance the quality of the hay as well.

People would also need agricultural education and training and as local farms are lost, so is local agricultural knowledge. One participant suggested expanding farm education programs in schools,

People were not under the illusion that renewable energy and agriculture could seamlessly replace the fossil fuel industries, but they did see promise in these areas as they looked to the future.
What the Coalfield Listening Project Tells Us

Our conversations ultimately left us inspired by the resilient spirits of people in our region and hopeful for the future we will make together. This future will be built by those who remain fiercely loyal to this land, its country roads, steep hillsides, and close-knit communities. As the fossil fuel industries struggle, we must not get lost in despair. Instead, we must seize the opportunity to create something different. We must move beyond a single-industry economy, locked into boom and bust cycles, and fueled by propaganda, which deflects all criticism away from companies and their business practices.

We acknowledge the difficulty of living with the daily impacts of truck traffic, drug abuse, loss of community, and pollution in the area. We also acknowledge the toll of these problems and impacts over years, even decades, and how it has affected people. There may not be a fairytale ending of rolling hills dotted with small, family farms. Yet, as long as people maintain the resolve and commitment, which have been hallmarks of our region for decades, we are confident that we can overcome the challenges, present and future, we will face.

At CCJ, as we strike a balance between Environmentalism and Environmental Justice, we will be seeking to preserve a healthy, vital environment which can serve as the solid foundation and inspiration for the next chapter in this region.

One participant shared a frightening vision of the future which reminds us all of the importance of this transition and the value of a clean environment. She said,

_We have to live on this earth. The animals have to live on this earth and now they have nowhere left to live because of people wanting new barns, new tractors and new trucks. I said having money isn’t everything because all that money won’t be no good when this town is a wasteland. When their farms are worthless. When the value of them is nothing. You can’t even sell ‘em because they’re poisoned. Nobody will want ‘em, you know. But who’s gonna pay that price is the children. Because their parents are gonna die and go away. The children are gonna be left with the mess. That’s who’s gonna have to clean this all up, when this whole booming business is over and done is the kids and they ain’t gonna know what to do with it._

We believe this report provides a window into the lives of some coalfield residents, bringing their stories and experiences to light. We recognize that these thoughts do not represent a comprehensive picture of attitudes and ideas across the region. These stories were shaped by the histories and perspectives of the people who lived to tell them.

We heard in nearly every interview that people feel deeply conflicted. They feel like they have to choose between the people they love, who work in the coal and gas industries, and the land they love, which is threatened by these industries. One participant said,

_It’s a double-edged sword. I value nature, that’s why I live here. I like the remoteness, the quietness. It’s not so green anymore; it’s not so quiet anymore…. [The coal miners] are wonderful human beings. They’re great people. It’s their job. So how do you draw the line between something that is destroying something that you value?_

One person felt torn about expressing frustrations about the gas industry to friends who work in the industry, “I feel bad. I feel like they think I’m personally attacking them…. They are hardworking, honest people.” We envision a future in which people in this region do not have to make this choice. We want a future in which we do not have to choose between jobs and healthy places to live.

Our hope at the beginning of this report was that these stories could spark discussion and debate, among the people featured here, other people in the community and people across the region. These dialogues are the starting point for a just economic transition. As we work toward this future for Greene and Washington counties, the stories shared as part of this project will serve as our guideposts.