Introduction

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. We wanted to know more about the lived experiences of people in our region and 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. How long will the coal and gas industries be here? What comes next? How do we diversify and ultimately transition Greene County’s economy away from fossil fuel dominance? How do we transition in a way that is fair and just for current employees in coal and gas industries? With the Coalfield Listening Project we wanted to find out how people in the communities where CCJ works answer these questions. In turn, we would use those answers to guide our work. We also wanted to share what we heard with other people who live in our region, so that we could start working together to solve the problems that we face and build a better future.

About the Authors

The Center for Coalfield Justice (CCJ) is an environmental justice advocacy organization in southwestern Pennsylvania with over two thousand members and supporters, most of who live in this region. Our mission is to improve policy and regulation for the oversight of fossil fuel extraction and use; to educate, empower, and organize coalfield residents; and to protect public and environmental health. To carry out our mission, CCJ provides educational presentations and resources to communities in Greene and Washington counties. Furthermore, CCJ assists communities in organizing local people to stop the harms of coal mining and shale gas drilling, or fracking, in our area. We also advocate for better protections and pursue litigation and other legal action to help end the routine violations of state and federal law that occur constantly in this area.

For over 20 years, CCJ has been fighting for environmental justice in Washington and Greene Counties. Environmental Justice, a concept coined by Black Civil Rights leaders in the 1970s, is a vision of the world where everyone lives in a safe, healthy environment, regardless of their race or income. Environmental Justice also describes the struggle to end the practice of constructing harmful, polluting facilities near low income and minority communities. We distinguish Environmental Justice, which is focused on people and the communities where we live, from Environmentalism, which tends to focus 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.

CCJ’s Deputy Director, Veronica Coptis, and AmeriCorps Member, Ben Fiorillo, were the primary authors of this report with contributions from other CCJ staff members and listening project volunteers. In this report, when the term “we” is used, it
refers to the experiences, opinions, and perspectives of the Center for Coalfield Justice as a whole.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, CCJ would like to acknowledge the 30 people who agreed to be interviewed for the project. These individuals took time out of their schedules, invited CCJ staff and volunteers into their homes, and shared with us testimonies of struggle and hope for life in this region. Although their names are not included in this report, we are truly grateful for their time and deeply inspired by their stories.

The Coalfield Listening Project would not have been possible without the work of the volunteers on the Listening Project Team. They traveled long distances across our region to conduct interviews and seek out the stories and ideas that appear in this report. These volunteers include: Randi Chambers, Ken Yonek, Kira Austgen, Ruth Martial, and Dana Poole.

We would like to acknowledge the Pennsylvania Mountain Service Corps for awarding CCJ an AmeriCorps Member to help with the project. Finally, we would like to thank the Three Rivers Community Foundation for their financial support of the project.

Why did we conduct the Coalfield Listening Project?

Our region’s economy is heavily dependent on fossil fuel industries. This is especially true in Greene County where coal mining and shale gas drilling are the major employers. Twenty-seven percent of all jobs in the county 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 of these industries is unclear since they rely on fossil fuels, which are a finite resource. The outlook on coal in the coming years is particularly bad. Due to a number of factors, demand for coal has dropped dramatically in recent years and mines across the country are idling or being shut down. The price of coal is $49.95 per short ton, the lowest it has been since 2008, when it was $52.46 per short ton. At the end of 2015, Alpha will close its Emerald Mine, the third-largest deep mine in Pennsylvania. Consol, the other major operator in the region, recently announced furloughs for workers at the Bailey Mine Complex in Greene County and slashed healthcare benefits for thousands of current and retired miners.

The natural gas industry appears stronger than the coal industry at the moment. The fracking boom has produced an abundant supply of natural gas and has generated

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new demand for the resource. Demand for natural gas is displacing demand for coal as more utilities switch over to natural gas-fired power plants. But how long can the fracking boom be sustained? In the first half of 2015, we saw just how vulnerable the industry is to volatile energy markets. Low gas prices led to a major slowdown in Marcellus Shale drilling and thousands of layoffs across the region. Suffice it to say, the outlook for natural gas is not as rosy as the industry portrays.

We believe that we need to get away from these industries not only because of boom and bust economic cycles and unpredictability, but also because we want to see an end to the harms to public health and the environment caused by extraction industries. Coal mining and fracking are polluting the air, destroying water supplies, tearing up farmland, and displacing communities in Washington and Greene Counties. We want this to stop. Mining and fracking are also producing massive amounts of greenhouse gas pollution and driving climate change, which threatens our future, both here and across the world. Pennsylvania already accounts for about 1% of carbon dioxide emissions globally, and the state’s contributions to greenhouse gases are likely far more significant due to methane pollution (since methane is a far more powerful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide).

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 do not want those jobs to go away tomorrow. 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.

We know change is going to come to the region and we want to ensure that the community is leading that change. With the Coalfield Listening Project, our goal was to start creating a community-based vision for this future. We also wanted to find out what people’s lives are like here and now. What do people like about their communities? How are people being impacted by the fossil fuel industries? What other problems do they face? Do they believe that change is possible? We believe that lasting social change must be driven by the most impacted people; this is a core principle that guides our work as an organization. The listening project sought to compile local people’s’ ideas and visions for change to start creating that change together.

**How did the Coalfield Listening Project work?**

A “listening project” is a type of survey that relies on in-depth interviews to collect information on how people feel about an issue and compile stories from their lives. Many traditional surveys ask closed-ended questions with a set of pre-determined answers in order to generate quantitative data about an issue or issues. A listening project, in contrast, asks open-ended questions in order to explore the complexity of the issues and hear the stories and experiences behind the issues.

Over the course of eight months, our team of ten people, five CCJ staff members and five volunteers, interviewed thirty people living in Washington and Greene Counties. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. We used a set of thirteen guiding questions (Appendix A), which revolved around four main topic areas/categories: attributes of the region, problems in the region, the local economy, and visions for the future.
The people we interviewed were not a random sample. We interviewed people who we thought would be most willing to participate. A majority of participants (17/30, 57%) were among CCJ’s base of 2,000 members and supporters. A small number of participants (4/30, 17%) were personal contacts of CCJ staff and volunteers who had not previously been involved with the organization. Nearly a third of participants (9/30, 30%) were people with whom we had no previous contact. We found most of this final group of participants through a listing of local farms. We attempted to find more participants outside of our existing networks, however, it proved difficult to find people that we did not know and that were willing to sit down for an hour-long interview.

Twenty-five out of thirty participants (83%) were current Greene County residents, most of who lived in the area west of Waynesburg, PA. Four participants (13%) lived in Washington County and one participant lived just over the state line in Monongalia County, West Virginia, but had a second home in Greene County. Most participants had roots in the area: seventeen participants (57%) had grown up in Washington or Greene counties, while thirteen (43%) were born outside the region. We interviewed only a small number of young people. Five participants (17%) were under age forty, while twenty-five (83%) were over age forty. We interviewed slightly more men than women. Seventeen participants (57%) were men, while thirteen participants (43%) were women.

We did not ask participants to share other demographic information such as racial identity or income level. We also did not ask each participant specifically about their employment, however, there was one question that invited participants to offer information about their employment. We do know that 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.

What is in this report?

This report is organized into four sections, based on the four main categories of questions. In each section, we provide a summary of the themes that emerged in each category. Then, we weave together excerpts from different interviews to illustrate each theme. We provide some quantitative data about how often different themes arose, but the report is largely a collection of stories.

We chose to keep all participants anonymous in this report. We did not use the names of our participants, and we removed other identifying information as best as we could without eroding the integrity of their stories. At times in this report, we use pseudonyms (denoted with an asterisk) as stand-in names used to protect someone’s identity. For the most part, we refer to the people we interviewed as “participant”. All quotations used in the report are taken directly from interviews conducted by CCJ staff and volunteers; therefore, we do not use citations for the quotations. There are citations for factual information taken from other sources.

We recognize that this report is not the product of objective or unbiased research. Our methods and what we chose to include in this report were shaped by our biases and we want to make our partiality clear. First, we believe, for all of the reasons
outlined above, that we must start creating alternatives to the coal and gas industry. 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.

Second, our participants were not a random sample. Many of them were members and supporters of CCJ prior to being contacted for this project, and many of them are critical of coal mining and fracking. We do not claim that their views are representative of the views of everyone in our region, or that their experiences are typical for all Washington and Greene county residents. However, in a region where energy companies create such a strong culture of fear and intimidation that silences public opposition to the fossil fuel industries, we think it is critically important to highlight these voices. We hope that readers, who may not be willing or able to share their feelings about these issues publicly, might relate to what is shared below.

What follows in this report is a tapestry of the ideas and stories of 30 people in our region. As the authors, we avoid making conclusions and generalizations. Instead we have tried to let participants’ voices come through. They raise important questions about the current state of affairs and the ways this region can move forward. We hope that what follows can spark discussion, debate, and, above all, action toward creating a better future.

I. Attributes

We began each interview with two inquiries: “Tell me about the place where you live,” and “What do you value about your community?” Before we explored the problems that participants identified or their visions for the future, we wanted to find out what they considered to be the attractive or positive attributes of the places where they lived. Two key themes emerged in our participants’ responses. A majority of participants (17/30, 57%) said that people and community were a key attribute of the place where they live, while an even larger percentage of people (20/30, 67%) identified the rural lifestyle and landscape as key attributes.

People and Community

The majority of our participants expressed a sense of connection to the people around them. 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. “I like the small-town persona where everybody knows everybody,” said one man. Another 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 that people described went beyond a feeling of belonging, and was grounded in being able to rely on their 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 the relationships they had here. Many of them described how, in other places, they had not found the sense of community they experienced here. 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.

**Rural Landscape and Lifestyle**

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.” Some people contrasted the rural lifestyle they enjoyed with living in a city. “A big city, I couldn’t do it. Not even living in town,” said one participant. Another man said this, “I’m not a population kinda person. I like to have a little bit of land to where I can enjoy the outdoors. In the inner-city you can’t do that.”

The desire for peace and quiet, however, did not signify that people were not involved in their communities. Many of the people who valued peace and quiet also said that they were close with their neighbors and that a sense of community was important to them.

Regarding participants’ attachment to the rural lifestyle, one story in particular stands out. We interviewed a man, David*, at his Greene County farm in the early spring. David told us that oil and gas companies have been approaching him for years with offers to purchase or lease his mineral rights for gas drilling. He has turned them down every time. The latest offer, he said, was to buy his property outright, for over a million dollars. When asked why he hasn’t 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.

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.

II. Problems and Concerns

When we asked about the problems people see in their communities, our participants identified many issues and were willing to speak at length about them. Participants talked much more readily about the problems in their communities than about what they valued in their communities. We heard a wide-ranging list of problems. Participants spoke about poverty, racism, poor political leadership, climate change, and the lack of cell phone and Internet service. A number of participants talked about the loss of local farms, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section. 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 rocked by the loss of several young people who had overdosed on heroin in recent years. One woman reflected on it this way, “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 this happen to her peers. She said, “It is bad. There’s been people around my age that I’ve had to go to their funerals. Which is hard...There’s people that we found out were on drugs and I wouldn’t have even guessed. Like I was around them, and I wouldn’t have guessed.” Another woman said, “Good friends of ours who have a farm; I went to their son’s funeral...OD’d on heroin.”
Participants believed that the problem had become much worse in recent years. One participant, who was in his late twenties, described how things had changed, “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.

Others were not so sure there was a link between a rise in drugs and the natural gas drilling boom. One woman thought that jobs in the gas industry were helping with drug problems. “I think the work has helped honestly. Most companies drug test. So people can’t get away with it.”

The most common explanation participants had 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.”

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. This problem is especially severe in western Greene County, where a majority of our participants lived. 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, rather than repair the damage. As a result, the coal industry now owns a huge share of properties in western Greene County, which, in most cases, have been left abandoned.

One participant told the story of when the mine passed under her property. She lost the water from her well and ultimately sold her home to the mining company. In describing what happened she said,

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 the taxes they pay for those properties. 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.” Taxes then go up for the people who remain.

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,

At one time, when I was a student at West Greene...there was somewhere around 1,100-1,200 kids in the school system. Right now, I don’t think there’s even 700 or 800. So, they’ve lost almost half their kids. They’re down now to where they’re graduating about 50 kids a year...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.

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?

**Fracking**

Participants most commonly cited the impacts of fracking as problems. Some participants were opposed to fracking outright; they wanted to see an end to shale gas drilling in the region. But the majority of the participants had mixed feelings about it. They weighed the benefits the gas industry brought to the area with the problems it caused locally. They wanted the problems to be fixed, instead of a wholesale ban on drilling.
Chief among their concerns was the issue of truck traffic. Thousands of trucks crisscross the region every day hauling heavy equipment as well as water, sand, and chemicals needed for the hydraulic fracturing process. The trucks create traffic and a greater risk for accidents on narrow, winding country roads. “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, “The traffic from the gas well up on the hill is creating dust. We feel like we are living in the dust bowl; there is dust on everything.” Another participant described the fumes, “You got 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.”

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.

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.

Finally, participants were worried about the impact of fracking on water quality. Over the years, CCJ has worked with a number of local people whose water wells have been contaminated with chemicals associated with fracking. No one we interviewed for the listening project had directly experienced water contamination from fracking. However, a number of participants were concerned about this possibility—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.

Whether it was the traffic, the destruction of the land, or the pollution of the water, participants described a feeling of being besieged by the gas industry. 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.

III. Jobs and the Economy

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. The average rating was a six, though responses varied widely. Some participants said that opportunities in their immediate area were low, but were high in the region as a whole. Overall, there was a perception that job opportunities were better now than they were in the recent past, and people invariably attributed the increase in opportunities to the natural gas industry.

In this section, we will focus on participants’ perceptions of jobs and other economic benefits associated with the natural gas industry. Almost everyone we interviewed had something to say about how the gas industry has impacted the economy.

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. Twenty percent of participants (6/30) were farmers themselves, which accounts for some of this interest in agriculture. Still, many participants who are not farmers commented on the state of this industry.

**The Natural Gas Industry**

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. One man said this, “Well I’m pretty much talking about all the bad. But I’ve got some money from gas guys. And that was good.”

Fracking has brought new jobs to the area. 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. “Everywhere I go, I see signs for jobs,” said one woman.

One participant’s experience, however, contrasted with some of the hype about fracking jobs. Jackie* was the only person we interviewed who had actually worked in the gas industry. When we talked to her, Jackie had just been laid off by a water hauling company. 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, barely more than most service sector jobs. She had also been through three different jobs in only a few years. After her hours were cut with the company she worked for locally, she had to take a job five counties away from her home to find 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.” There is no doubt the gas industry has brought economic benefits for the region. But both Jackie and Andrea’s experiences show that those benefits have not been felt equally.

**Agriculture**

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 be going 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.

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The decline of small-scale farming is not unique to Greene and Washington Counties. All across the country, there are fewer people working the land. The industrialization of agriculture over the past 75 years has put many small farms out of business and concentrated production into large-scale, often monoculture, farms in the Midwest and California. One farmer described how things are stacked against the small farms,

All the policies of the USDA are in favor of factory farms and the big corporate farms. And the small farms with 10-12 animals...you can’t get any kind of help. And the EPA, whether you got one cow or a million cows the rules are the same for manure management.

However, in Greene and Washington counties, farmers also have to contend with the impacts of coal mining and fracking. 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 when the 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.” As we will explore in the next section, other participants were also hopeful about the future of farming in the region.

IV. Visions for the Future

We concluded each interview by asking the following: What do you hope for the future of this region? In other words, what are some solutions to the problems described above? How can our region start to transition our economy away from fossil fuel extraction? How can we build on the assets we already have to create something new? 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.”

This sense of despair was real and permeated many of our interviews. Sadly, the woman quoted above is a lifelong Greene County resident who said she wanted to sell her house and leave the region. For others, under the hopelessness was a sense of determination and loyalty to the area. One woman described how, even if she didn’t 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. Here, we will highlight people’s ideas for the economy, because economic diversification and transition were
the focus of our questions. However, participants also spoke about changes they wanted to see in other areas, like education and government.

The ideas that came up most consistently for diversifying and transitioning the economy were renewable energy and local agriculture. There was certainly not consensus on this. 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.

**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,

You know a lot of the coal miners I worked with are very innovative. I mean, you have electricians, you have mechanics, you know, guys that know how to fix things.... Those skills are valuable in the society. Not just in the coalmine. You take an electrician out of the coa-lmine, they could be an electrician out in the real world.

But how can industries like wind and solar actually gain a foothold in our region? Jason believed it would take major policy efforts on the state level, crafted by good leaders who have the interests of workers at heart. He stated,

You gotta have the right people.... You gotta have the right representatives, state representatives, state senators.... You gotta have the right ones who have forward thinking. You know, they put in emissions standards, that’s the reason why a lot of coal mines have shut down in Virginia, Kentucky, West Virginia because of the CO2, the emissions standards for power plants. And what I think our state
legislators should do is think forward. Think, “okay, if that’s the way it’s gonna be, you can’t stop it on the state level, it’s already federal.” So, what do we gotta do? We gotta bring in more, how do I wanna say this? Green jobs...they gotta get [the miners] jobs.

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 farmer we interviewed said, “There’s a smaller farming community. I guess what I’d like to see for the area is to build that back up again.”

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.

What would be needed to make this happen? First, 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.

In order to expand farming in this area, people would need agricultural education and training. As farms are lost, so is local agricultural knowledge. One participant suggested expanding farm education programs in schools,

There are a decent amount of kids in the FFA and the 4H programs in the county, but the problem is only two schools in the county have FFA. Waynesburg and West Greene are the only two schools in the county that do that. So it would be nice to expand that to all the schools; I’m sure there’d be involvement.
Denise imagined creating an agricultural training center,

I think we could really re-employ people, because there’s a lot of people who know a lot about farming too. They could even train people...almost like a high-tech center, but it’s a farming tech center.... All of the things you would need to know about farming, you would find out in this area. It’s just ripe for something like that.

How many people could actually make a living as farmers in our region? Denise believes it could be a lot. She said, “It’s a good time to be in farming.” Especially, she noted, organic farming.

David, the man who has refused to sell his mineral rights, simply saw the revitalization of local agriculture as a necessity. He said, “[We] need to start looking at the family farm as part of the infrastructure of this country... You get a case of swine flu or avian flu, they can wipe out a factory farm in no time. So what are you gonna eat?”

One man summed up the sentiments of many participants about the future of the economy when he said,

I’d like to see the people who work in the energy industry be able to be trained to do other jobs and still be able to make the same amount of money to provide for themselves and their families.... I think that’s really important, for us to not demonize the workers themselves, because they’re just doing what they’re told....That’s what I would like to see, first and foremost, is the old gone, the new brought in, and the same people, the people from here, not people from Texas and New Mexico and Oklahoma...doing the jobs.

Whether or not renewable energy or agriculture can truly be the future of the region is an open question. What participants offered was not a prescription for economic development. They did not profess to have the answers, but they did have ideas about the kind of future they wanted. They were not under the illusion that renewable energy and agriculture could seamlessly replace the fossil fuel industries, but they did see promise in these growing fields.

**What the Coalfield Listening Project Tells Us**

Our conversations ultimately left us inspired by the resilient spirit 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, its 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. Again, 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. 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. What we learned from participants in the listening project will influence CCJ’s day-to-day work. For example, after hearing about the desire for local farming to expand in the region, we are now more inclined to educate ourselves on how we can support local farmers— both veterans and people just starting out.

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. As we work toward this future for Greene and Washington counties, the stories shared as part of this project will serve as our guideposts.

Appendix A: Coalfield Listening Project Questionnaire

1. Tell me about the place where you live.

2. What do you value about your community?

3. What brought you and your family here?

4. What problems do you see in your community?

5. How do you think those problems should be addressed?

6. If you are currently employed, where do you work?

7. In your mind what makes a good job?

8. On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you rank job opportunities in your community: 1 being no good local jobs and high unemployment; and 10 being plenty of good local jobs and no unemployment?

9. What do you know about the coal industry and how do you feel about it?

10. What do you know about the gas industry and how do you feel about it?

11. Have you experienced impacts, positive or negative from mining or fracking?

12. What do you hope for the future of this region?

13. Is there anything else you would like to share?