

# The Future of S.W. VA *Coalfields* RRs -- ?

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Residents of the far southwest section of Virginia have long felt, with considerable justification, that eastern urban residents and legislators have frequently been oblivious or unresponsive to their concerns. Most Virginians of today have forgotten that the Old Dominion lost its far-western counties (today's WV) by failing to respond to their concerns about inequitable electoral representation in the Legislature, lack of internal improvements and, of course, the institution of slavery. Here we focus on internal improvements, specifically roads and rail, both essential components of future economic vitality. One day, the Southwest should be a success story, rather than a problem, but it is unlikely to ever happen if we simply let nature take its course.

On the roads side of the State's transportation ledger, there are plenty of voices calling for construction of the so-called Coal-Fields Expressway, but who is thinking about the future of rail in Buchanan, Tazewell, Dickenson, Scott, Wise, Russell and Lee Counties? If no one is -- which we suspect to be the case -- then somebody should put it on the agenda, without delay. While some of the current S.W. Virginia rail infrastructure exists to move West Virginia and Kentucky coal *through* Virginia, other lines are primarily there to move coal mined in S.W. VA. Sadly, that business is going away fairly quickly. Virginia coal production peaked, it seems, around 1990 at about 47 million tons annually. It has been declining ever since. In 2010, the most recent year for which we could find statistics, it was said to have been only about 22.5 million tons. Worse still, at this rate, recoverable reserves (that is, known reserves that can be extracted and marketed in a cost-effective manner), suggest that the end of large-scale coal mining in Virginia could occur in about ten years. That of course could, and hopefully will, change, but for now we have to assume the worst-case for purposes of rail planning.

Eastern Virginia residents see a lot of coal headed for Hampton Roads, mostly for export, but only a portion of such coal is from S.W. VA mines (the balance from WV and KY mines). Norfolk Southern, which handles virtually all S.W. VA coal, has demonstrated its limited tolerance for maintaining rail lines no longer required for current coal traffic. We refer to the 2005 abandonment of the 38-mile line through Farmville in Southside VA. In fact, if N.S. doesn't need it, why should they have to maintain it? [We still believe loss of the Farmville line was an unfortunate public policy mistake!].

Virginia has a Rail Preservation Fund ("RPF") that could and should be used to protect rail lines which the public-interest may require in the future. Although the RPF never has had sufficient money to do all that is arguably warranted, the S.W. Virginia rail situation needs to be considered along with the Coal Field Expressway when addressing the Commonwealth's transportation funding needs for the second and third decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The cry "*Money for Transportation*" is heard so often that elected officials

undoubtedly get tired of it, but the day is certainly coming when increasingly-obvious transportation imperatives can no longer be deferred We urge those responsible to at least put S.W. VA RAIL preservation on the list. #####