

Home / Opinion / Columns

[https://www.idahostatejournal.com/opinion/columns/coal-enters-a-new-era-in/article\\_2ff65587-818b-5442-a0f0-51ec35eb9d9e.html](https://www.idahostatejournal.com/opinion/columns/coal-enters-a-new-era-in/article_2ff65587-818b-5442-a0f0-51ec35eb9d9e.html)

## Coal enters a new era in 2019

By Terry Jarrett 4 hrs ago



Online

For those who follow energy policy in the United States, these are intriguing times. A number of significant changes are underway, with natural gas occupying a newfound prominence in electricity generation. Some older coal plants are being retired, too. And more utilities are exploring wind and solar even as nuclear power continues to recede from consideration.

The pace of change is somewhat dizzying, given the complexities of maintaining sufficient electricity for a nation of 325 million people. The challenge will be to find a smart, cohesive energy balance across this shifting landscape.

For example, California and nine other states are already pursuing new quotas for electric vehicles. Those mandates alone could significantly increase electricity demand across the nation's power

grid. Can America continue to churn out sufficient baseload power each day? And what role will coal play, now that nuclear power is on the wane?



Undoubtedly, coal has lost market share in recent years. A hefty spate of regulations over the past decade saw coal plants close in record numbers. And many of the mines needed to supply them shuttered as well, with more than 62,000 coal miners losing their jobs between 2011 and 2016.

Water tends to run to its lowest level, however, and America's coal fleet has emerged leaner than it was before.

In 2017, coal still supplied 30 percent of U.S. electricity, compared with 32 percent from natural gas. What policymakers must consider now is how much more coal-fired power can realistically be retired before the loss of so much around-the-clock, baseload power threatens the reliability of America's overall electric grid.

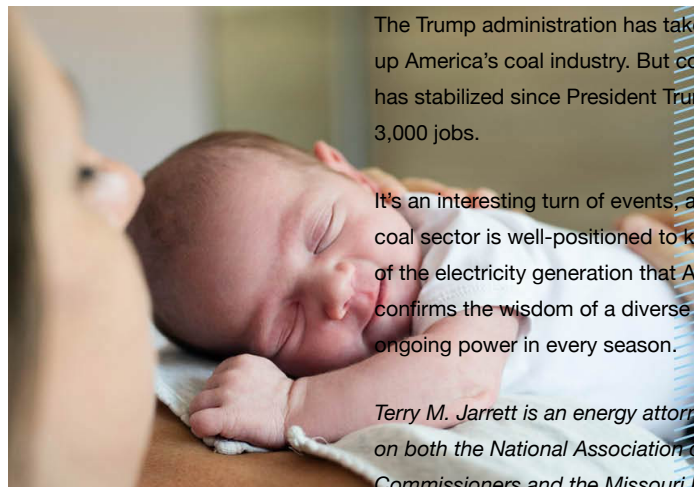
This should be a pressing concern, since much-touted wind and solar power only work when the wind blows and the sun shines. And as recent events have demonstrated, there are also consequences for being overly reliant on natural gas.

For all of natural gas' strengths, challenges remain. Utilities are still beholden to a vast, spidery network of pipeline systems that criss-cross the continent, delivering just-on-time gas supplies. Regional grid operator ISO New England has already cautioned about fuel uncertainty for the six states it supplies.

Natural gas is prioritized for home heating, and ISO says that high heating demand during unpredictable winter cold snaps could mean "very little to no pipeline capacity for electric generators, which creates a number of concerns for the power system."

ISO-NE explains that such fuel constraints could "sideline thousands of megawatts of natural-gas-fired generation." When that happens, "system operators turn to power plants with stored fuel—coal, oil, or nuclear—to meet demand." Last winter Boston was forced to import Russian liquified natural gas when the region's over-taxed pipeline network struggled to meet demand.

Natural gas has also seen price spikes in recent months due to increased demand and lower domestic storage. It's an issue that bears watching, since America's exports of natural gas are projected to triple by the end of 2019.



The Trump administration has taken criticism for attempting to shore up America's coal industry. But coal mining employment in the U.S. has stabilized since President Trump took office, and gained roughly 3,000 jobs.

It's an interesting turn of events, and it suggests that the nation's coal sector is well-positioned to keep supplying the bedrock portion of the electricity generation that Americans need each day. (It's also confirms the wisdom of a diverse energy portfolio that can supply ongoing power in every season.

*Terry M. Jarrett is an energy attorney and consultant who has served on both the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners and the Missouri Public Service Commission. He contributes regularly to LeadingLightEnergy.com.*

# Expecting? Expect the Best

Celebrating over 1,300 birthdays each year

One of the most important decisions expectant parents make during pregnancy is where to celebrate the birth of their child.

- Experience Matters
- Private Accommodations
- Extra Amenities

- Tours and Birthing Education
- Private Accommodations
- Extra Amenities

[Portneuf.Org](http://Portneuf.Org)

