

# **Letcher and Harlan residents are more likely to favor natural-resource extraction and see environmental regulation as a bad thing, polls find**

**By Mary Chellis Austin and Al Cross**

University of Kentucky School of Journalism and Telecommunications

Residents of two major coal-producing counties in southeastern Kentucky have become more interested in using local natural resources for economic gain rather than conserving them for future generations, and they increasingly think environmental regulations have generally been bad for their communities.

People in Harlan and Letcher counties were surveyed by the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire in 2007 and in 2011.

The change in attitudes was most evident in Letcher County, where the percentage of residents who said local natural resources should be used to create jobs now jumped from 35 percent in 2007 to 54 percent in 2011.

In 2007, only 16 percent of Letcher County residents in the poll said conservation and environmental rules have generally been a bad thing for the community. In 2011, that share approximately doubled, to 36 percent.

The Letcher County polls' margins of error were plus or minus 4 percentage points and 4.3 percentage points, respectively. The 2007 poll surveyed 595 adults in the county; the 2011 poll surveyed 525, both by telephone.

Harlan County's change in attitude was smaller. The percentage of people who said environmental rules have generally been a bad thing jumped from 19 percent to 30 percent, and the share preferring use of natural resources rose from 40 percent to 49 percent. The latter result was within the polls' error margins, meaning there was a small chance that attitudes on that question had not really changed.

The error margins of the 2007 and 2011 Harlan County polls were plus or minus 4.9 and 4.4 percentage points, respectively, on survey samples of 405 and 495 adults. Error margins apply to each result in a poll, not to the difference between the results.

Taken together as a region, the two counties showed a clear change in attitude. The share favoring use of natural resources to create jobs rose from 37 percent in 2007 to 52 percent in 2011.

The share who thought environmental rules had been bad for the community rose from 17 percent in 2007 to 33 percent in 2011. Both results were outside the error margin for both polls, which was 3.1 percentage points.

Why have people's opinions changed?

Roy Silver, an instructor at Southeast Community and Technical College in Cumberland and a Harlan County resident for more than 20 years, said the recession has put the area under more economic stress and the coal industry has mounted strong public-relations efforts against what it sees as excessive federal regulations on water pollution from mining and air pollution from coal-fired power plants.

Silver said he has noticed a fundamental shift in how the issue is framed by the coal industry. He mentioned pro-coal groups Friends of Coal and FACES of Coal, and the practices of many companies letting workers off to attend pro-coal rallies.

"It's been a constant bombardment of that," he said, alluding to what pro-coal forces call Obama's "war on coal."

The industry PR campaign has had an impact beyond the coalfield, 6<sup>th</sup> District U.S. Rep. Ben Chandler of Versailles said last week after losing to Republican Andy Barr, who made Chandler's and President Obama's positions on coal the central issue in a district with no coal mines.

"We polled coal early on, and . . . it polled through the roof," Chandler said.

The combination of industry PR, political messages, the Obama administration's regulatory efforts to limit climate change, and coal-mine layoffs driven by cheap natural gas – not regulations, at least in Kentucky – may have created a sort of siege mentality in the region.

"The kids are being taught that how we make a living is destroying the planet," said Shad Baker, Letcher County's extension agent for agriculture and natural resources. "The region just starts to get an edge after a while. Imagine if the industry where you live were being blamed for the sole cause of global warming and destroying the planet."

Aside from this tug-of-war on coal argument, Silver said he sees other factors at play in these changing attitudes, including the interpretation of "natural resources," a phrase used in one of the poll questions.

"There are a lot of people who are very much connected to the land," Silver said. "It is very much a part of their identity." He mentioned hunting, gardening and four-wheeling as examples of recreational uses of the land.

Despite their answers to the question about environmental regulations, people in the two counties appear to have a growing attachment to the region's environment. The percentage who said the region's natural beauty is an important reason to remain there rose from 65 percent in 2007 to 71 percent in 2011, just inside the 3.1-point error margin.

"When you talk to people about their connection, they wrap it around them with some sense of security, while at the same time, there's not much job opportunity," Silver said.

Roger Noe, a professor at Southeast and a former state representative, said the economic picture looked much better in 2007 and said he thinks that the downturn revealed longstanding attitudes.

"Folks in the two counties you mention generally have a fatalist attitude and therefore do not have a strong sense of planning for the future anyway," Noe said. "In years past when a miner went off to work, he and his family were not sure he would return so they only planned for the here and now."

Some of the locals' comments show that the here and now is their biggest concern.

Mitch Combs, 25, of Letcher County, said he has been working for his dad for 10 years at Combs Construction and relies on coal miners for business.

"Eighty percent of the people we remodel for are miners," Combs said. "We didn't do anything when they laid them off. It's what keeps our economy going in Eastern Kentucky."

This dependence is made clear on the T-shirts on the staff at a Double Kwik in rural Letcher County, which read, "Thank you coal miners."