

The West is moving away from coal

By Daniel Rothberg, Las Vegas Sun

Southern Nevada's last coal plant closed March 16. That same day, a New Mexico power company said a plant on Navajo land might be next to shutter. And in a somewhat unexpected decision the month before, regional utilities announced the early shutdown of the West's largest coal plant, also on the Navajo Nation. President Trump might have pledged to invigorate the industry, but most economists agree on one trend: Western coal is unraveling.

The outlook was different in 2010, when the Sierra Club launched its Beyond Coal campaign. It deployed lawyers, mobilized supporters and lobbied state legislatures to shut down coal-fired power plants across the U.S. in an effort to curb carbon emissions. Then something changed. The argument against coal expanded from one about the environmental costs to one that cited economics.

"The economics of power generation don't support replacing coal-fired generation," said Robert Godby, who directs the Center for Energy Economics and Public Policy at the University of Wyoming.

That's a primary reason why utilities across the West are retiring old coal plants instead of building new facilities or investing in modern infrastructure.

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