

# Jim Roth: A breath of fresh air, finally

By [Jim Roth](#), Director and Chair of the Firm's Clean Energy Practice Group. This column was [originally published in The Journal Record](#) on Dec. 31, 2015.

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## A breath of fresh air, finally

The percentage of children in the U.S. with asthma is leveling off, and even finally declining in certain demographics, according to a government study published in the journal *Pediatrics* this week. Asthma affects a child's life in many ways, including limiting the child's physical stamina, keeping the child from participating in certain activities, and – if an asthma attack is severe enough – causing hospitalization and even death.

The precise cause of the decline in childhood asthma is unknown, but experts state that many factors may be contributing to this change. Improved air quality is one such obvious factor. The energy sector has helped improve air quality as energy generation continues to shift away from coal to cleaner-burning natural gas and various forms of renewable energy. Coal has long been the predominant fuel source for energy generation in the U.S. and abroad because it is technologically simple to extract and easy to transport, which has kept coal prices low for utilities to purchase for energy generation. Unfortunately, coal is the dirtiest, most carbon-intensive fuel source, and burning coal is also a leading cause of smog, acid rain, and toxic air pollution. Many of these external effects, like air pollution in the forms of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, particulate matter and mercury, cause real health issues, especially for those in closer proximity to coal plants.

Utilities are turning to natural gas to fuel energy generation for two reasons: the low price of natural gas and heightened air quality regulations. Natural gas prices have dropped dramatically in recent years due, in part, to enhanced recovery technologies in shale gas production. Concerns about health impacts and climate change have influenced domestic and global policies on air quality and emissions standards such as the Clean Power Plan and the recent Paris Agreement. Renewable energy generation from wind and solar sources is also at record levels and its increase has helped lower the overall pollution profile from the power sector across our country. These changes in policy and energy generation are great for the environment and our citizens' health, and they have likely contributed to the decline in childhood asthma and other air quality related health issues. The coal industry, however, is suffering as a result.

One indicator of the coal industry's struggle is its poor performance in the stock market. Since 2011, the stock prices

of publicly traded coal companies have sharply declined. For example, Peabody Energy – the world's largest private coal company – was trading for over \$70 per share in 2011, but now it is trading for about \$8 per share. Another indicator is the decline in the coal industry's share as a fuel source for energy generation. Over the past five years, the percentage of energy generation produced by coal across America has declined from 50 percent to approximately 40 percent, and this decline is largely attributable to the increased competition in the energy generation market from natural gas and renewables. Finally, perhaps the most significant indicator of the turmoil in the coal industry is the number of companies that are closing their doors. A recent report indicates that 26 U.S. coal companies have declared bankruptcy. According to the Department of Labor, employment is down 24 percent in the coal industry since 2011, which equates to approximately 21,000 jobs.

While these figures are certainly bad for the coal industry, cleaner fuel sources lead to better air quality and improve public health. Shifting away from coal-fired energy generation to cleaner energy solutions is one way the U.S. can improve the health of its citizens, extend life expectancies and rid children and families from life-limiting threats like asthma and other respiratory disease.

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