

The Future of Coal in Nova Scotia

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The history of coal mining in Nova Scotia dates to the earliest 1600s, when coal from Joggins was used to fuel forges at Port Royal, through to today, an unbroken record spanning four centuries. Until non-carbon energy sources can offset hydrocarbon resources, coal will continue to be a necessary source of energy for a growing world population. The challenges facing coal today and in the future are as significant, although much different, as those that faced the first miners 400 years ago.

Overly optimistic statements regarding the future of coal in Nova Scotia have persisted since the first discoveries. Perhaps the most misleading has been the mantra that Nova Scotia has over 3 billion tonnes of coal, enough to supply the province for 250 years. Such is not the case. Much of this resource lies at depths prohibitive for mining, or in seams too thin or impure to meet reserve requirements. That said, resource blocks exist that may be won with effort and engineering ingenuity, such as offshore Sydney Basin at Donkin, and offshore Western Cape Breton at Mabou-Inverness. Near-surface resources have been largely won, although reserves exist in the Springhill coalfield. Here, as in all surface mining operations, land use and public concern can be more problematic than geology, even with the strong record of reclamation in recent years.

The story of coal as an energy resource for Nova Scotia is unlikely to end with the last major underground mining operation. The future of coal in Nova Scotia may well lie in unconventional recovery techniques, such as underground coal gasification, which is experiencing a worldwide resurgence, even more so than in associated unconventional gas prospects such as coal bed methane.

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