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## What Price Power

Charles Compton (2010-04-19)

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**RICHMOND, KY (WEKU)** - The energy industry's casualty rate is tracked by the U-S Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 2007, it says, a coal miner was six times more likely to die on the job than the average U-S worker. Here's another way of looking at it. That year, 28 coal miners died while at work. So, roughly speaking, for every five-million American homes using electricity generated by coal, one miner died. Preventing his death might not be possible it might not even be cost effective.



Firemen clear debris after an explosion at the Kleen Energy power plant in Middletown

"Yeah, the way economists look at this is to think about the risks involved in the activity, in this case, mining coal, and to think about what the value of reducing the risks would be," said Glenn Blomquist, who's a professor of health economics at the University of Kentucky. Blomquist looks at cost of preventing deadly industrial accidents.

"So, there are various safety measures that could be taken. They cost something. Then the question is, we get safety benefits from that and what are those safety benefits worth," he said.

People in the oil and gas extraction industries also work in dangerous conditions. In 2006, 125 died on the job. The high number alarmed the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and, it asked the Centers for Disease Control to investigate. It said most victims were either crushed to death, or killed in transportation accidents and then recommended safer equipment and more safety training.

Renewable energy also has dangers. In 2005, four workers died at hydro-electric plants. Wind power proponent Paul Gipe tracks wind-power related deaths on his website [windworks-dot-org](http://windworks-dot-org). Worldwide, since Gipe started keeping track in 1975, windmills have killed 37 people.

"Any technology that converts energy to some form that we want to use is hazardous.

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Then the question becomes how hazardous is it? What are the risks associated? Have we been informed of the risks? Are we willing to accept those risks?" asked Gipe.

Most of the casualties, said Gipe, are the result of falls; some by electrocution. The figures, he adds, are honest. They represent the true human cost of wind power. The toll taken by other energy sources are not always known. For example, coal miners don't only die in accidents they're also killed by black lung disease

"Nuclear power or coal or natural gas, a lot of the hazards associated with that are not apparent, they are hidden from the public's view. One of the things I like about renewable energy and I like about wind energy, is that its hazards, its impacts are apparent. So that when that you, as a society, choose to use wind energy, you can immediately make the balance yourself," said Gipe.

Professor Blomquist said such fatalities, both obvious and hidden, add to the economic cost of energy. For example, more money is spent on safety equipment and on training. Plus, the economist said, workers in dangerous jobs tend to earn more money.

"One can think of hazard pay for the workers who are installing solar up on high roofs. The same with wind, with big turbines way up there. I'm very confident that some of those risks, if not most of them, are reflected in the pay that folks get for working there," said Blomquist

Keeping workers safe is not just an economic issue it's also emotional. For example, professor Blomquist said American society is emotionally prepared to underwrite almost any rescue. What's curious, said Blomquist, we still place limits on what we'll pay for accident prevention.

At first prevention is easy and cheap. Within fifty years, between 1936 and 1986, this nation reduced the number of mining deaths by nearly 90 percent. After 1986, we cut the annual death rate by almost half. But, said Blomquist, there comes a point of diminishing returns; when an ounce of prevention is no longer enough and the cost of safety skyrockets.

"Some people don't like this because we're placing a finite value on safety, but, the reality of the situation is that we don't have an infinite amount of resources and whatever we spend on safety in one place doesn't get spent on safety or food or health or education, something somewhere else" said Blomquist.

If the cost of safety gets too high and eliminates profits, then, said Blomquist, energy companies shut down. A classic example is the nuclear industry. When compared to other energy sources, nuclear power has a very low casualty figure. But, this nation has stopped building commercial nuclear reactors. For many Americans, the risk of an accident and its potential casualties were too great; making nuclear, in human and

economic terms, unaffordable.

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