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CONTACT: Jina Belcher

jbelcher@nrgrda.org

304-888-1149 (Cell)

NRGRDA Strategy to Prioritize Coal-to-Products Commercialization to Revitalize Southern West Virginia Economy

By Jina Belcher

Ground zero for federal efforts to boost communities reeling from the downturn in coal as a major economic driver is focused on southern West Virginia -- where I and many of my close colleagues were born, have lived, studied, and worked our entire lives.

Acknowledging that the predominance of coal for power generation is fading, the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority (NRGRDA) recognizes that West Virginia continues to have metallurgic-grade coal that is valuable for use when innovating new end-products. Additionally, southern W.Va. is home to a variety of coal residual materials, or coal by-products, that are currently used by successful W.Va.-based companies to create new and innovative supply chain materials. Other countries have been utilizing residuals to make advanced products -- why would we not take advantage of that same opportunity?

As an economic driver in southern West Virginia, NRGRDA has identified five priorities with a focus on creating a regional coal-to-products commercialization initiative in West Virginia's most negatively impacted coal communities:

1. Regional coal industry mapping of coal by-product sources and identification of their uses in new product development.
2. Identification of existing technical assistance resources to promote and support the coal-to-product commercialization process.

3. Exploration and identification of clean energy technology opportunities offsetting the carbon footprint.
4. Creation and implementation of a failure analysis process that indicates early-stage coal-to-product viability.
5. Solving the access-to-capital challenges during research and development of viable products.

A greater understanding by the federal government

The Interagency Working Group on Coal and Power Plant Communities and Economic Revitalization, created by the Biden Administration in January 2021, has identified southern West Virginia as #1 and Beckley as #23 on their list of 40 priority communities to target for transition funding and technical assistance. The over-arching goal for this funding is to create good-paying jobs, spur economic revitalization, remediate environmental degradation, and support energy workers.

I applaud the Biden Administration for acknowledging that significant funding and technical assistance is imperative for economic development practitioners like NRGRDA to support communities as they pivot to alternative uses for coal and coal by products, as well as other innovative industries. The most recent announcement of \$3 billion dollars appropriated to the U.S. Economic Development Administration, creating the *Investing in America's Communities Initiative*, specifically targets \$300 million to coal community economic development. The Interagency Working Group meetings I've been fortunate to participate in are intentionally listening to stakeholders and are exploring all options to achieve regional priorities. On June 3-4, I had the opportunity to meet and hear from DOE Secretary Jennifer Granholm, former Governor of Michigan, when she addressed an Interagency Working Group meeting in Morgantown during her visit to West Virginia and the National Energy Technology Lab. Her commitment to supporting coal communities was clearly articulated and genuine and all subsequent Interagency Working Group meetings have supported that positivity.

Strong leadership from West Virginia's own

West Virginia native Dr. Brian Anderson, a descendent of coal miners and skilled researcher who leads the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) National Energy Technology Laboratory (NETL), was named by President Biden as executive director of the Interagency Working Group. Dr. Anderson is a renowned scientist with extensive expertise in technology development for carbon management in hard-to-decarbonize sectors. West Virginia is fortunate that Dr. Anderson is at the helm of the group tasked with spearheading national efforts for diversification of coal-based economies.

Additionally, NRGRDA continues to have consistent support from our Congressional delegation who serve on the right committees (Appropriations, Energy and Natural Resources,

Environment and Public Works, Energy and Commerce, and Ways and Means) to help coal communities deliver results and secure resources.

Research and skilled workforce training

Our efforts at NRGRDA and among our partners are enhanced by years of research into coal-to-product viability. In a report developed by the National Energy Technology Lab in 2021, the Department of Energy identified the potential demand for new coal production and mine employment. The DOE estimates that, by the year 2050, almost 47,500 new jobs will be created in the mining industry to effectively mine the estimated 145-345 million metric tons per year needed to fill the need for the various applications of available coal-by-product feed stock. Additionally, the report values the carbon products produced in 2050 at \$139 billion dollars.

A solid infrastructure of coal companies and firms using coal-to-products

The private sector has stepped up and taken proprietary and government research and converted it into scalable companies applying coal-by-products to effectively manufacture new, innovative materials. West Virginia based company, CFOAM Carbon Foam, located in Triadelphia, W.Va., successfully creates building materials using carbon foams. Additionally, X-MAT produces X-TILES™ coal core composite roof shingles made from proprietary chemical and coal powder at their Bluefield, W.Va.-based location. Looking regionally, there's no shortage of coal-to-product manufacturing that has proven viable and lucrative when diversifying use of coal-by-products.

The NRGRDA, along with the West Virginia Hive Network and the Country Roads Angel Network, both initiatives of the NRGRDA, offer significant business counseling, market research, financing, incubator business hub space, and other services to support this initiative. For these compelling reasons, NRGRDA and its partners believe a regional coal-to-products initiative in the Mountain State's transitioning coal communities offers significant opportunities and a way to honor our coal heritage.

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Jina Belcher is executive director of the NRGRDA. She was born in Welch and is a graduate of Concord University in Athens.

About New River Gorge Regional Development Authority: The mission of the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority (NRGRDA) is to initiate, facilitate and support the economic and community development efforts within the counties of Fayette, Nicholas, Raleigh, and Summers located in this region of southern West Virginia. NRGRDA stimulates the regional economy through business expansion and retention efforts, including an extensive portfolio of financial services; the management of sites for new companies locating to the region; and

serving as a point of access for local service providers which offer a variety of technical assistance for business owners. <https://nrgrda.org/>