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# Wyoming's Boom Poses Challenges For Obama

By KIRK JOHNSON

GILLETTE, Wyo. — Many economic signs are looking bright for Wyoming right now, and this red-knuckled city of **coal** miners and **oil** field mechanics is leading the charge.

“Things are picking up,” said Cody Chase, 24, who had just finished an overtime shift at a coal mine north of here and was having a 7 a.m. burrito and beer at a downtown breakfast joint. Hours at the mine are up, said Mr. Chase, who makes \$26 an hour after less than a year on the job, and new workers have started coming on.

It is the sort of talk that should warm the hearts of political leaders, including **President Obama**, as he prepares his re-election campaign. He might even expect to get a little boost from it.

But that does not appear to be in the cards in Wyoming, where he received only 32.5 percent of the vote in 2008, his weakest performance in the nation.

Republicans, who dominate Wyoming politics and culture, are loath to give Mr. Obama credit for good economic news. And environmentalists, who filed a lawsuit this month challenging the entire coal-leasing system, say they think he has failed to live up to his promises on carbon and **climate change**.

The bottom-line message is that the climb out from this **recession**, if Wyoming is any measure, could be as politically turbulent as the descent.

Economists say administration policies to reduce imported energy, along with higher commodity prices, are bolstering what Wyoming has to offer — natural gas and oil, coal so near the surface it can be harvested without underground mines and endless wind for electricity turbines.

Just last month, Mr. Obama's interior secretary, **Ken Salazar**, came to Wyoming to **announce the timetable** for billions of dollars in new coal leases near Gillette, in the state's northeast corner. Some coal industry boosters saw that as a strong signal of support — coming less than two weeks after the **Japanese earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis** — for traditional energy as the backbone of the national supply.

But many other residents here say they still see Mr. Obama as the enemy of Wyoming's mineral bounty.

“He's perceived as the energy killer,” said Barrett K. Norris, co-owner of Thunder Basin Homes, a manufactured housing company in Gillette.

Mr. Norris said that by his company's measure, Wyoming had a very mild eight-month economic slowdown. And in the last few months, the demand for housing — a proxy for energy markets since the local economy swings by those rhythms — is back at full throttle. Even cattle ranching, tough in the best of times, is showing strength.

“But I don't know anybody who voted for him or likes him,” Mr. Norris said of the president.

L. J. Turner, a rancher south of Gillette, also sees the energy sector accelerating into a gallop. But he fears that prospect, especially the impact on air and water from the mines, and the loss of public grazing lands, all of which, he said, affects the 10,000-acre spread homesteaded by his father and grandparents. He voted for Mr. Obama but feels let down.

“I thought he’d be more of an environmentalist,” Mr. Turner said.

Whether Washington has a coherent energy policy in the West — and whether it could ravage Wyoming as a resource provider or send its economy to the stratosphere — is also up for debate.

The administrator of the State Economic Analysis Division, Buck McVeigh, said he thought Mr. Salazar’s visit, talking about coal so soon after the Japan quake, was a subtle but powerful message that Wyoming’s role as the nation’s biggest coal provider was not going away.

The [Wyoming Mining Association](#), a lobby group that represents both coal and drilling interests, read things much the same way.

“He’s recognized reality,” the group’s executive director, Marion Loomis, said of Mr. Obama.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Salazar, Kendra Barkoff, said that the timing of the announcement was coincidental.

But she said there was no doubt that Wyoming’s broad portfolio of energy sources, from coal, oil and gas to wind and [geothermal](#), made the state crucial in Mr. Obama’s plan to reduce the nation’s reliance on imported fuels.

Wyoming, with all minerals combined, is a bigger source of thermal energy for the rest of the nation than Canada or Saudi Arabia, let alone any other American state, according to a study several years ago by the Wyoming State Geological Survey.

And a comfortable home for fat state budgets. As many other states look at cuts and layoffs to make ends meet, Wyoming’s mineral severance tax collections last year were the third-highest ever, trailing only the boom years of 2006 and 2008.

But there is also perhaps an older, deeper theme at work. A long constant of the culture in this vast state has been the view that powerful forces — from the railroads in the late 1800s through Wall Street and Washington in the modern era — are out there pulling the strings, and usually they are not to be

trusted too much.

That perspective flows through the state's politics, too, whether the subject is big coal or big politicians.

"If only they could do it in a way that didn't step over all the little people," said Karla Oksanen, a Gillette resident who has battled the mines over air quality issues.

Some residents agreed that national energy policies might just be benefiting the West just now.

But Travis Norberg, a 34-year-old coal miner, said economics formed only part of his critique. He said he was proud of his job and happy with the paycheck. But the federal health care overhaul, Mr. Norberg said, is a huge stumbling block to ever thinking favorably about Democrats.

"I just don't agree with it," he said.

But in a state where hard-fisted industry and Republican values are so intertwined, even some of those who like Mr. Obama are not eager to speak up.

"I don't need the trouble," said a railroad engineer who defended the president, then declined to give his name.



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