

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg Donates \$50 million to Sierra Club's Beyond Coal Campaign to Move America Toward Cleaner Energy

Press Conference Transcript

July 21, 2011

Marianne Hitch: Good morning everyone. It is a very good morning, indeed. My name is **Marianne Hitch**. I am the director of the beyond coal campaign at the Sierra Club, and 9 years ago when I started full time to end mountain top removal, I never imagined that we would all be here this morning. I grew up in east Tennessee in the Smokey Mountains, and I now live in West Virginia. I started working on coal issues because mountain top coal operations started blowing up 500 mountains, burying 2000 miles of streams, polluting the air, polluting the water, turning small towns in to ghost towns across Appalachia, and I was heartbroken, and I was outraged. In the past decade, we have all learned that coal mining is only the beginning of the problem. And that coal pollution threatens things that we all care about: mountains, clean water, clean air, our children's' health, our own lives, and the future of this planet.

It's our biggest source of global warming pollution, of mercury pollution, of soot. It causes tens of thousands of premature deaths in asthma attacks every year, and it costs this nation 100 billion dollars in health care costs every year. So the Sierra Club tackled this problem. In 2002, the same year I started fighting mountain top removal when it launched its coal campaign, at that time a very small effort that relied heavily on volunteers. And in the past nine years, many, many allies from coast to coast we have stopped the construction of 153 proposed coal-fire power plants. Had those plants been built, they would have locked this nation into another 50 years of another generation of dirty, polluting energy. But, those plants were not built. And so now, we have a choice, and the choice is this: as our existing fleet of coal plants approaches retirement, are we going to replace them with clean energy, or are we going to replace them with more dirty energy?

The Sierra Club's beyond coal campaign is taking the lessons that we've learned and the movement that we've built in stopping those 153 coal plants, and we're turning our focus to replacing the nation's existing fleet of coal plants with clean energy, and we are already seeing successes. Plant by plant, state by state, town by town, communities are standing up and are winning campaigns to phase out polluting coal plants that have threatened their health for decades. This nation is at an energy crossroads, and if we move beyond coal, we not only save mountains, and save thousands of lives, and save the planet, but we will open new markets for clean energy, it will unleash a new generation of innovation, and job creation from coast to coast, ensuring that America will lead the world in developing the clean energy technologies of the 21st century. And in this decade long fight, at this crossroads, on a code orange day for air pollution, in the shadow of the most deadly and polluting coal plants in America, today we have a game changing announcement. It is my great honor to introduce the man who is here to make that announcement - philanthropist, environmentalist, mayor of New York City, **Michael Bloomberg**.

Michael Bloomberg: Marianne, thank you. And good morning. Thank you. Just so, in the interest of full disclosure for the press, these are all my cousins, that's why they're cheering. Seriously, it's long been a passion of mine, public health, both as a citizen and mayor. I've always thought that improvements that we can make to public health help millions live longer, healthier lives, and, uh, shame on us if we don't, it just makes an awful lot more sense to prevent illness than to just worry about curing it. It would be great if people never got sick, and we could devote our resources elsewhere. And I've always been proud of the work Bloomberg Philanthropies is doing around the world that will help improve public health and improve millions of lives. And at the center of both of those efforts is a common goal, and that is clean air. By eliminating tobacco smoke from New York City's indoor workplaces as well as public parks and beaches, we're helping people breathe easier, live longer, and I'm proud to say life expectancy has increased by one year and seven months in the last 10 years, and life expectancy in New York is greater than the country as a whole. So for all of you in Washington and around the country and you want to live longer, come to New York.

So here's the other side, this is outdoors, I'm joining the Sierra Club on another front for the battle for clean air, and that is by ending America's reliance on coal fired power plants, specifically by working to phase out existing power plants like the one right behind me. And we're calling this campaign beyond coal. It's especially timely to put the focus on coal on a day where the region is under code orange, as **Marianne** said. A code orange alert for pollution levels is considered dangerous for children and other particularly vulnerable people. Every year, coal burning power plants cause 200,000 asthma attacks nationwide, many of them affecting children. Coal pollution also kills 13,000 people every year, and costs us 100 billion dollars in medical expenses, just think about that, 13,000 people, and something that's planned. And it's going to happen next year, and the year after and the year after unless we do something about it. The burning of coal does terrible harm to children, mothers and families across the country. Every year, coal pollution causes birth defects and developmental problems for children, and we can change it.

There's just no question about the science. You can see the results, you just look at the air people breathe and look at their medical history, the correlation is very clear. And I'm pleased to announce that Bloomberg Philanthropies is making a pledge of 50 million dollars...I'll wait for this (airplane). I wasn't waiting for the applause; I was waiting for the airplane to go by.

I am pleased to announce that Bloomberg Philanthropies is making a pledge of 50 million dollars over the next four years to support the Sierra Club's beyond coal grassroots campaign. And, making a commitment of my own time and energy to that campaign as well. And I'm doing this because it's time for America to find a new energy path, one that takes us beyond coal, beyond the soot that burning coal puts into our air, beyond the mercury that burning coal puts into our water and beyond the health consequences that burdens so many people in big cities, in suburbs and in rural areas across this wonderful country. The time has come for our nation to

begin transitioning away from coal fired power plants, to cleaner, more efficient and more cost-effective energy sources. If we succeed, and I fully believe that we will, we will save millions of lives, and we will help millions of children avoid asthma and its debilitating effects. For nearly a decade, the Sierra Club is leading a coalition of organizations looking to stop construction of new coal-fired power plants across the country. And to support production of alternative energy sources. They've done the research that demonstrates just how much damage a coal plant can do to a community, polluting its air, polluting its water, and how little economic benefit it brings. They've worked with local groups and responsible companies in the energy sector to develop alternative plants that would reduce prices but produce cleaner energy – solar, wind and natural gas – and, in fact, the company that owns the plant behind me does have some natural gas fired power plants. Nobody suggests that they shouldn't have a profitable business, and self generate and self energy, we want them to do that. We just want to do it in a way that reduces the damage to all of us. And we think that if they do it that way, it will also enhance their profitability. It has worked what the Sierra Club has done so far, since 2002, they've stopped the construction of more than 150 plants all over the county, and in every case, they have worked with local utilities, local governments and local community groups and plan to reduce that dirty energy with energy from cleaner sources.

And leading this effort, what they've found is that in communities around the country, they've won support from both republicans and democrats, because both benefit from clean water and clean air. And unlike in Washington, at the local level, republicans and democrats can actually work together to solve problems.

Now today, we're beginning in a new phase in this effort. The money we're committing to the beyond coal campaign won't clear our air or water, but it will help people across America in small towns and big cities and neighborhoods achieve those goals themselves. It will help them challenge the operations of the dirtiest coal fired plants in the nation. Let public service commissions know that cost-effective alternatives exist. Get out the facts about the true comparative costs of solar, wind or natural gas in generating electricity. Reveal that natural gas plants create just as many jobs as coal fired plants do, and that solar and wind powered plants create may more local jobs. Inform their neighbors about the damage of coal-fired plants, and–the damage that coal-fired plants do to their health and the health of their children. It will help stop power plants when they try to skirt the requirements of the clean air act, and blow the whistle on any lawmaker who endangers our children's lungs by weakening the EPA's ability to act.

The fact is, the cost of coal is going up, and the cost of generating power using wind turbines, solar panels and natural gas is coming down. In addition, many coal plants are very old and approaching retirement age. And rather than have public utilities spend billions of Americans' hard earned dollars to renovate them, we will work with utilities to find other ways to invest that money. So, we can retire old coal plants and replace them with cleaner sources of power. Now I understand that this is a controversial initiative, banning smoking in bars and restaurants

was controversial too. People said it would be terrible for the economy and tourists would stop coming to the city, in fact, it has been great for our economy, and more tourists have been coming than ever before. And we think that moving beyond coal would be good for our nation's economy in the same ways. Because the facts are, even though coal burning plants may seem to have a cheap price tag, the real price tag is hidden. Hidden in medical bills we have to pay, and environmental cleanups that we have to pay for.

Now, overall, the Sierra Club will need 150 million dollars, we calculated to succeed in this campaign. That's why we're asking the Sierra Club's 1.4 million members, its funders and others to support this work as well. We're confident of success. We know there are millions of people across America committed to putting our country on a new energy path. And the success of Bloomberg philanthropy's worldwide tobacco control and traffic safety projects, which, like beyond coal, rely on grassroots activism, show that such efforts can work. Bloomberg Philanthropies is committing 50 million dollars; we need others to come along. I've never asked anybody to do something that I'm not doing myself and that I haven't done first, ok, I'll put up 50 million bucks, if you want to improve the lives of Americans, this is a concrete way to do it. When you write that check, you have every reason to look in a mirror and know that you made a difference for others, but, incidentally, and perhaps not unimportantly, you're making a difference for yourself and for your children as well. This is about the air we breathe, the water we drink, the fish that we eat. It is about our lives today.

Before I turn the floor over, let me make two last points. First, in New York City, we've been moving beyond coal for quite some time, today only a small portion, roughly 7%, currently comes from coal-fired plants. A small enough amount that converting to natural gas wouldn't have any real impact on prices or reliability as long as there were responsible placements on coming on board. And it would be even better to replace some of that capacity with wind or solar for energy efficiency. You may know we've been working to bring offshore wind power to our city, and we've been working to put solar panels on the old, unused landfill sites all over the five boroughs. Second, even though the current gridlock on energy efficiency in Washington is discouraging, there is real progress happening in cities across the country and around the world. As chair of the c40s cities climate leadership group, an organization that includes many of the world's great cities, I'm well aware of the extraordinary progress that people in many nations are making in developing alternative sources of power. In New York City, four years ago, we launched PlaNYC, our agenda for creating an environmentally sustainable and more livable New York City. Our most recent update of PlaNYC calls for private cooperation to create solar powered farms on decommissioned power landfills, as I've said, and for nearly ten years, the success of the Sierra Club that they've had in promoting alternatives to coal fired power has shown that Americans from coast-to-coast want to breathe clean air, and that's why we're here today with the Alexandria gen-on coal burning plant as our backdrop. The people of this community are not waiting for congress to act, they know the dangers of coal, and what it can do their communities, their families and their livelihoods, and let the operators of the gen-on that change is coming. I'm proud to join them in the beyond coal campaign to clean our water,

improve our health and protect the environment that we give our children, and as the father of two daughters, I know I have an obligation to the next generation to do all we can to clean our planet.