

Ohio Coal Communities

Research Project:

Coshocton County, Ohio Case study



Formed in 1810, Coshocton County sits right on the edge of the Appalachian boundary and is an interesting mix of Amish and coal country situated in the heart of the Rust Belt. Coshocton County also sits at the crossing of the Muskingum, Tuscarawas and Walhonding rivers and was once a prominent canal county with the Walhonding Canal feeding into the Ohio and Erie Canal. Unlike Noble and Belmont, Coshocton County has not produced coal for a decade or more now, though they do have an extensive history of both surface and underground mining. Much of the coal that was mined in the region was ultimately burned at the AEP Conesville power plant, which is of course the focus of this case study community. One of the largest coal-fired plants in the country, the massive 2,005 MW plant was announced and broke ground on construction in 1955, and was commissioned and started its first operation in 1957. The plant would go on to run and provide electricity to the region for 63 years with its six in total operating units slowly being decommissioned starting in 2005 with the last shutting down on April 29th, 2020 just as the COVID-19 pandemic was getting underway in the United States. In the middle of this research project on December 19th, 2021 without any public notice the facility and the smoke stacks were demolished in two parts throughout the day. Former workers, community members and more gathered around the plant to watch it fall and say farewell to an industry that kept their community stable for generations. For now, it is still unknown as to what will replace the AEP Conesville power plant, though local officials believe that the space will be repurposed to make way for some other new industry.



The AEP Conesville power plant stands east of the small town of Conesville, OH which has a population just over 300 residents. Photo by Dane Rhys, Bloomberg

Key Takeaways

Coal communities are not a monolith. Every community experiences a unique set of strengths and challenges

The infrastructure built by the coal industry holds symbolic power in the communities they're built in – strong attachments to them are made

Grief born from the loss of these industries and the impact on the community must be acknowledged and honored.

The AEP Conesville plant's imprint on the tax base was irreplaceable. Carefully managing that loss will be crucial moving forward.



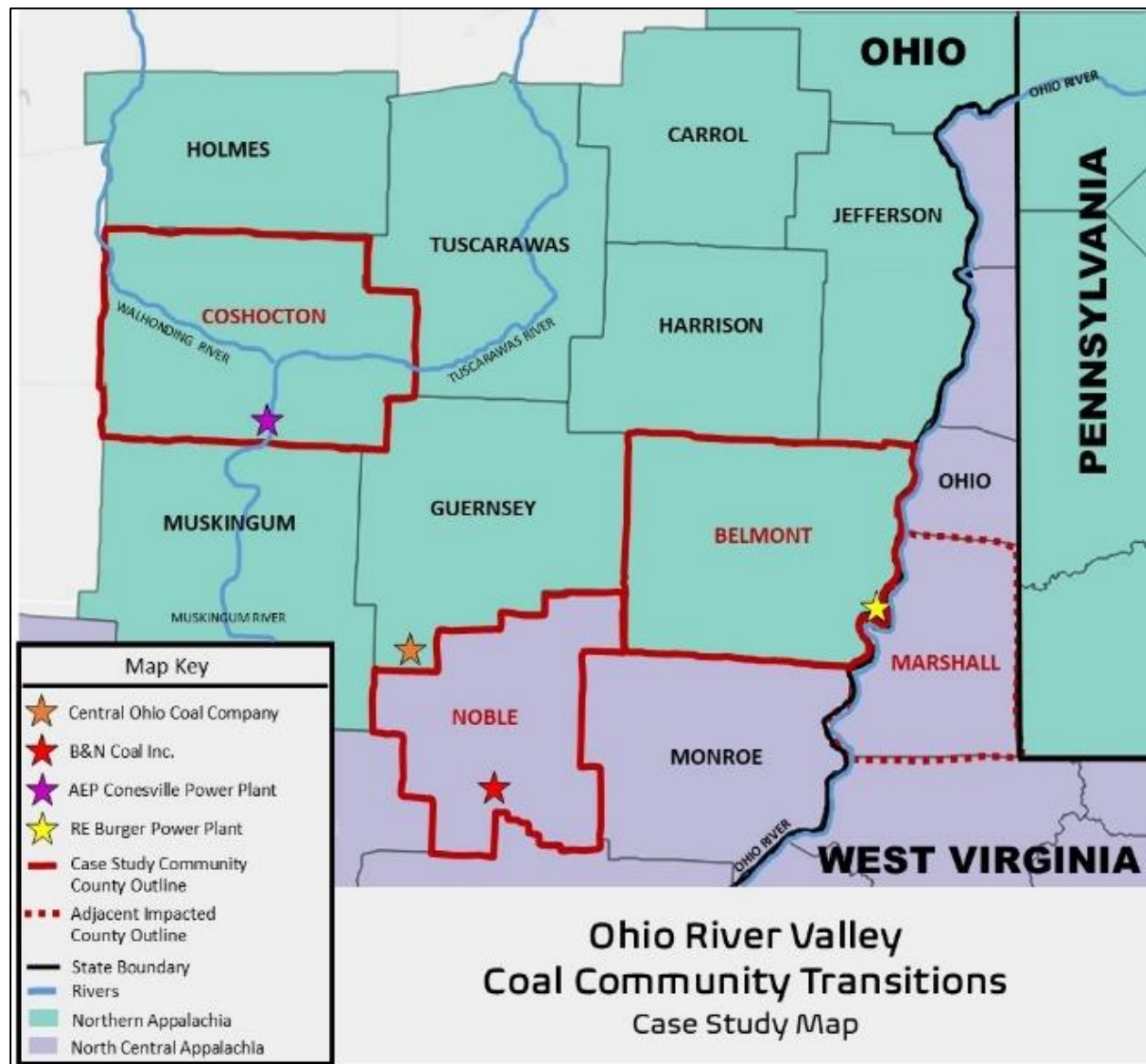
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Community Development at Ohio State University Extension
helps communities enhance their well-being and create social, economic and environmental conditions in which they can thrive.

energizeohio.osu.edu

Geographic Overview:



Map by Katie Finneran 2022

- Coshocton County is located in the heart of Ohio's Appalachian region.
- The county seat, Coshocton, Ohio, is known as the "The Made in the USA City."
- Coshocton is at the confluence of three rivers and was the hub of the Ohio Erie Canal in today's historic Roscoe Village, a restored 19th century canal town.
- Located between Columbus, Ohio, and Pittsburgh, PA, along SR 36 and SR16.



View from Atop Conesville Power Plant Stacks
Photo courtesy of Rob McFarland

Coshocton County Economic Profile



36,608
Residents

- Coshocton population in 2021 was estimated at 36,609 with a >.01%
- Coshocton County's population density is ~64.8 people per square mile, making it the 78th most densely populated county in Ohio



627
Businesses

Feb. 2022 Unemployment = 5.0%

Larger Coshocton Employers:

- Kraft Heinz Company
- Cleveland Cliffs (formerly AK Steel)
- McWane Ductile
- Coshocton Regional Medical Center
- Coshocton County Government
- Riverview School System

Top Industries:

- Manufacturing
- Health care and Social Assistance
- Retail Trade
- Educational Services
- Accommodations and Food Services
- Public Administration
- Utilities ranked 11th down from 7th in 2010

**More than 32% of the
workforce commute 30
minutes or more to work**



1,191
Farms

- Land in farms (acres) = 182,555
- Average size (acres) = 153.28
- Top 3 Crops Acreage: Corn (23,400), Soybeans (16,600), Wheat (800)
- Top 3 Commodity by Cash Receipts (in millions): Poultry & Eggs (\$22.385), Hogs & Pigs (22.166), Corn (\$16.224)



9.9%
Poverty

- In 2021, an estimated 9.9% of the total Coshocton County population was in poverty.
- Medium HH income = \$46,606
- Per Capita Income = \$35,962



Health

- Life expectancy is more than 77 years.
- In 2021, 46.4% of the population were aged 45+ years (with 19+% being 65+ years of age).
- 89% of residents have health insurance



Photo courtesy of Ohio History Connection

Ohio & Coshocton Coal History:



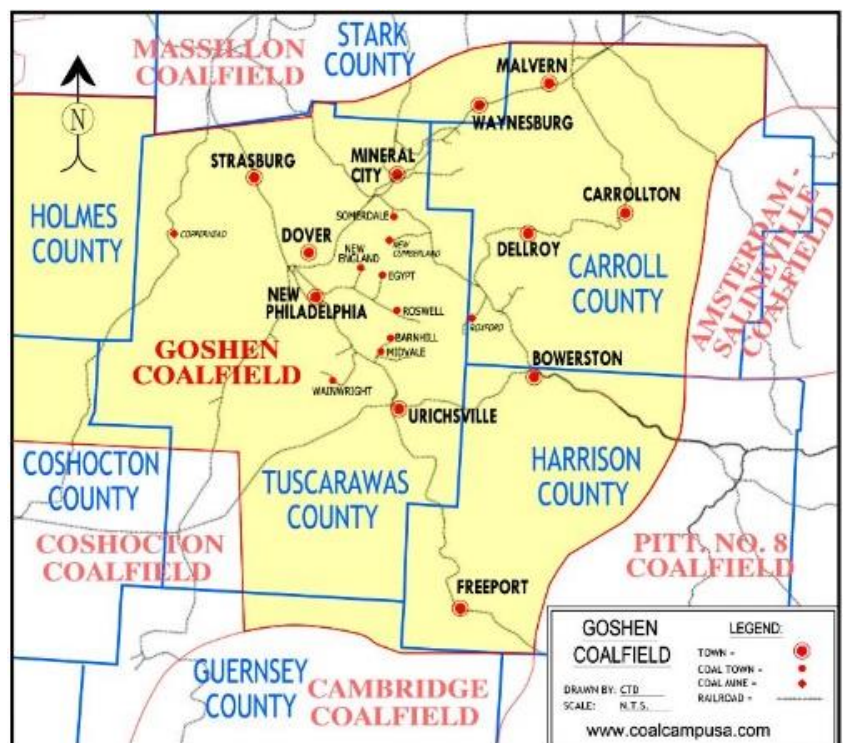
Historic Underground Coal Mining
Photo courtesy of Ohio History Connection

Coal was first noted in Ohio as early as 1748. Coal has been mined in Ohio since 1800. Mining technology has evolved from pick and shovel to the highly automated, computer-controlled equipment. Surface mining involves removing layers of soil and rock (called overburden) above the coal seam and extracting the coal. This method is used where coal seams lie close to Earth's surface. (Crowell, 2014)

The Appalachian Ohio Region has been a primary American coal producer from the early 19th century. (Lebau and all, 2021) It is "home to seven of the top 20 producing coal mines, four of the top 20 coal power plants; five refineries and more than 169,000 active oil and gas wells." (US Dept. of Energy – 2021) For more than 70 years, Appalachia has struggled with the coal transition (Adams and Bleizeffer 2020).

The 175-year legacy of mining in Coshocton county started in the early 1830s. In the early days, the coal was hauled by mules and horses. This later transformed into trains with 15-20 cars loaded with coal. On average, seven trains left Coshocton County in a single day, filled with coal. (Coshocton Daily Tribune - Oct. 2013)

The 2019 announcement of the Conesville power plant closure also impacted CCU Coal and Construction of Coshocton which announced cuts of 205+ jobs in mining and logging. (Burger, 2019)



<http://coalcampusa.com/eastoh/goshen/goshen>

Coshocton County Coal Impacts



Conesville Power Plant in Coshocton County, Ohio

Top Photo from Memories of AEP Conesville Facebook

Bottom photo by: William Sharp



Conesville Power Plant: 1957-2020

The Conesville American Electric Power plant started production of power in 1957 and ceased production of energy in 2020.

Coal-fired plants average about 40 years, but the Conesville plant was in operation for 62 years. "The first unit went online in 1957, with the second following in 1959. Unit 3 started in 1963, Unit 4 in 1973, Unit 5 in 1976 and Unit 6 in 1978." (Hayhurst, 2020)

AEP took over the plant in 1981 after purchasing Columbus Southern Ohio Electric Co. The plant could generate 1,590 megawatts of power and had about 600 employees at its height and was down to 165 staff at the point of closure.

Ohio Valley Coal Closures

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, from 2007 through 2018, more than 500 coal-fired generators, representing roughly 22 percent of all coal-generated electricity capacity, retired. In the Ohio Valley alone, 34 coal-burning facilities closed from 2009 to 2017.

Key Finding: *Coal Community Experiences are Diverse*

There are a range of varying issues dependent on the community's coal loss, whether it was a power plant, underground or surface mining losses or other transportation services. Impact to tax bases and the workforce are certain.

Coshocton County Coal Impacts

Coal Legacy

A coal plant closure is a large economic loss that is hard to get past in any economy. The Conesville power plant was also a purchaser of Ohio coal, much of it mined by the bankrupt Westmoreland Coal Company. CCU Coal and Construction cut more than 200 jobs in the region in 2019 after American Electric Power decided to close its Conesville plant in Coshocton County. About half of the company's cuts were at the Buckingham underground operation that spans Athens and Perry counties. Cuts were also made to operations in Coshocton, Muskingum, Belmont, Guernsey, Harrison, Jefferson, Stark and Tuscarawas counties. (Schultz, 2019)

Laying a Power Plant to Rest

A power plant funeral, or a “Celebration of Life” that coalesces alongside the process of demolition creates an opportunity for the community to process grief. (Finneran, 2022) For coal communities, the loss of these workplaces means a loss of the friendships that many of them have been building with each other over the span of decades, a second family sacrificed to the transition. Many workers and community members see these smokestacks on the horizon as a sign that they are almost home and consider these plants a symbol of their community. It could potentially help smooth the loss of them if they had a bit more say in how or at least when they were torn down. These communities spent their lives keeping these plants running, they should be allowed an opportunity to celebrate that lifespan and bury their own dead so to speak, in their own way.

Perhaps these insights and suggestions can create a platform for new norms around a transition away from coal to be born in these communities, between the space of this industry and the next.



Photo by Eric Skelley

Key Finding: **Symbolism Is Important**

One key research finding is the strong cultural attachment to coal as a “way of life.” Industrial labor also plays an important role in how residents interpret coal transition. The Coshocton Miner’s Memorial project was an effort to remember the lives lost to coal. Community memorials, events and support groups are key in helping communities process coal transitions collectively.



Photo by: William Sharp

The Importance of Coal Iconography Amid Transition

The Coshocton Miner's Memorial project shown below was an effort to remember coal. The Coal Miners Memorial sits at the corner of North Third and Chestnut Streets on the Coshocton County Courthouse Lawn.

The memorial was dedicated in October 2013. It represents all Coal Miners, their families and businesses both past and present that were involved in the Coal Mining Era of Coshocton County Ohio.

Community memorials, events and support groups are key in helping communities process coal transitions together.

Counting losses and Moving On

Coal losses most directly impact community tax bases (*esp. schools and levy services*) and local workforces without easy replacement options.

"The plant did a lot especially for the River View school, because that would be the school district that it was in. Not only did they help them doing donations for different things, like their park at the school, but remember, now, that was the tax base. That was a huge – probably a million plus loss – for that school district. Maybe at one time, possibly the richest school district in the state due to the tax base it was getting from AEP and this power plant."

- Interview with plant employee

"How do you convince a company to come invest ... into the property that AEP sat on to build another company just as good when the school buildings that employees are gonna be sending their kids into are 100 years old? The first they ask is "what are your schools like?" You know. When they could go to Dublin and put the same plant there and people will come there because they're gonna send their kids to school that are – at least appear to be great. Right?"

- Interview with school leader



Coshocton Miner's Memorial
Coshocton County
Photo courtesy of Visit Coshocton Co.



Coshocton Miner's Memorial
Photo by Dr. Jeffrey Jacquet

Post-Coal Possibilities

Coshocton Community Trends

Interviews with key community and industry leaders and workers showed that the Coshocton County residents are transitioning more quickly than other communities in the study. The county is home to manufacturers such as Kraft Foods, McWane, and AK Steel as well as other manufacturing and transportation companies that provide jobs.

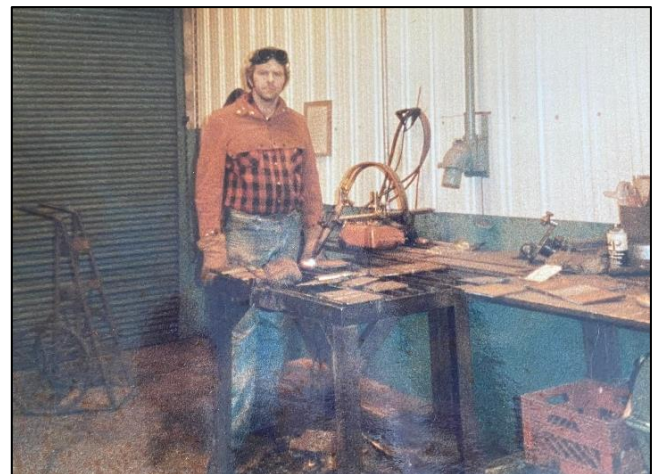
Coal power plant industry workers were highly paid but with niche, industry-specific skills and many are older workers with long careers in the coal industry. However, there are a wide variety of post-coal opportunities for workforce support available for diversification and workforce development and to help communities transition.

One lesson emerging in Coshocton County is that there's no one-size-fits-all answer for coal communities. Transition is unique and depends a great deal on the local leaders. There, a focus is set on control of the site for redevelopment, a revitalization of the historic downtown, emphasis on entrepreneurship and in attracting a regional health care operation as well as a continued emphasis on manufacturing. In addition, Coshocton County also has a variety of historic and ecotourism efforts underway.

*“Located in eastern Ohio, Coshocton has a mix of rural landscape and industrial labor common to much of Appalachia. It has rolling green hills and the occasional farm stand, but it’s also a place where people take pride in making things. **And like so many communities in Appalachia, coal mined here, then later burned here to make electricity, shaped the fabric of this community, and helped give rise to its industrial roots.** Coshocton is joining the growing list of Ohio Valley communities where coal plants are powering down. The power plant’s three massive smokestacks have been a fixture of the small town’s landscape for decades.” (Patterson, 2019)*



Photos of workers at the Coshocton power plant (unknown) taken from Memories of AEP Conesville on Facebook



Post-Coal Possibilities

Historic & Ecotourism

Appalachian Region

- Public lands are the foundation for Appalachian tourism. “Travel generates about \$60 billion in direct sales across the Appalachian region and employs about 577,000” (Ezzell, T. and all, March 2020).
- “If Outdoor recreation is the basis for much of Appalachia’s tourism, then public lands are the foundation of outdoor recreation and the bedrock of the Region’s travel industry.” *Public lands include national parks and forests; state parks and forests; local and municipal parks; rivers and shorelines; publicly owned lakes and shorelines; and wildlife management areas.* (Ezzell, T. and all, March 2020)

Ohio

- Coshocton County is home to the AEP Conesville Coal Lands, a 10,635-acre public hunting and fishing area located five miles Southeast of the City of Coshocton. The area provides over 100 lakes and ponds for fishing and an Equine Trail Area with camping.
- Clary Gardens offers 20 acres of rolling hills, woodland trail with sandstone outcroppings, springhouse, ponds, gazebo, outdoor amphitheater a children's garden, bridges and growing collection of native and exotic plants.
- An Ohio State University study estimates that there are 171 million outdoor recreational trips in Ohio, and that these trips are worth \$3.6 billion per year to the people who take them. It also estimates that in the course of taking these trips, outdoor recreationalists spend \$5.9 billion per year in Ohio’s economy, which amounts to about \$34 per trip. “The contribution of this outdoor expenditure to Ohio’s overall economic activity is estimated to be \$8.1 billion per year, which amounts to 1.3% of Ohio’s economy. The outdoor recreational sector is estimated to employ 132,790 Ohio workers.” (Gioglio, R. and all 2019)
- Visitors in Ohio’s Appalachia region spent an estimated \$3.8 billion in 2019 generating \$713.8 million in tax revenues with \$353+million accruing to state and local governments. (Tourism Economics, 2019)



Left: Draft horse teams pull the Monticello III Horse-drawn Canal Boat along a restored original section of the Ohio and Erie Canal for a tour as the Captain explains 1800s life on the canal.

Right: Clary Botanical Gardens
Photos from:
www.visitcoshocton.com

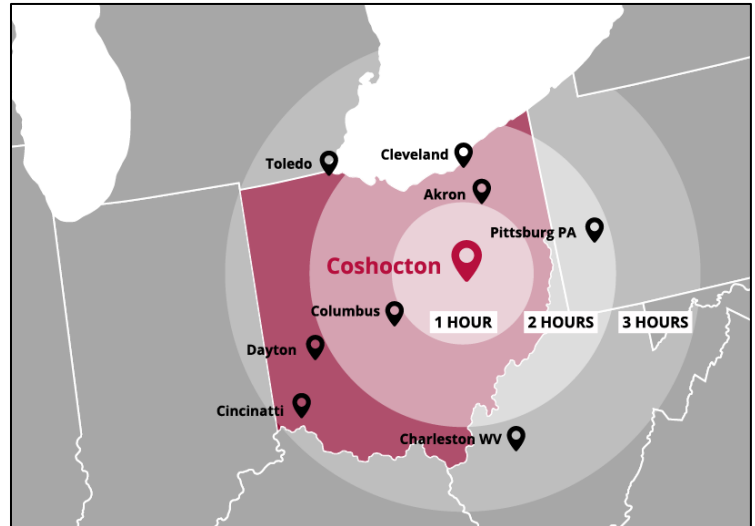


Post-Coal Possibilities

Brownfield Solar

Plans are underway to redevelop the Conesville Power Plant site and included in those are an on-site solar array.

- Conesville Green Energy solar farm, a 68-megawatt solar array on the Conesville Plant site
- Designed for areas otherwise not developable, and to attract new "green" businesses to the industrial park



Map: Coshocton County Port Authority

Proximity to INTEL

Plans have been announced by JobsOhio that Intel chose Ohio as the destination for its semiconductor manufacturing facilities. "This \$20 billion investment will bring 3,000 high-paying Intel jobs, 7,000 construction jobs, tens of thousands of indirect and support jobs, and an entirely new industry to Ohio." Intel's investment in Ohio is "unprecedented in size and importance for America. To support this transformational project, JobsOhio plans to assist Intel with up to \$150 million in combined economic development and workforce grants." ([JobsOhio 2022](#)) The project is in regional proximity to Coshocton County.

"The only thing I would probably advise other communities on is to try to be as diversified as possible in your job place. And, I guess, be prepared to retool. Be prepared to look in different directions and be prepared to think outside the box. But as far as what we could have done differently to prepare for it, I don't know if there was anything."

"I think that's one thing Coshocton County has been very good at-- is our community has always faced challenges head on. And we've always come up with solutions. I think Coshocton County is very resilient. I think that we've had a lot of big businesses close here in the county and we've always found ways to work around those losses and still be able to do what we need to do. I think our community takes it as a challenge, sometimes, that when they see something that seems insurmountable, our people seem to find a way to figure out how to get around it." Interview with Community Civic Leader

Ohio



Coal =
10,600MW



Solar =
112 MW

As of 2020: Energy News Network - energynews.us

Ohio Coal Transitions: Pathways for Community Resilience Research Team

A research and arts project that blends social science, fine arts photography, library and archival research, theatre, and Extension to tell the stories and animate community-centered discussion around coal transition

For the study, in order to understand the political, socio-cultural, psychological, and traumatic impacts of coal facility closures amidst multifaceted processes around the transition away from coal, the focus narrowed in on three case study communities in southeastern Ohio along the Northern Appalachian foothills: Caldwell (Noble County), Shadyside (Belmont County) and Conesville (Coshocton County).



On a Site visit in Noble County, from left: Max Woodworth; Katie Finneran; William Sharp (in mirror); Gwynn Stewart; Jeffrey Jacquet and Jeffrey Bielicki.
Photo by William Sharp.

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- **Jeffrey B. Jacquet, PhD** | Associate Professor School of Environment and Natural Resources, The OSU Sustainability Institute
 - **Gwynn Stewart, MS** | Community Development Educator IV, Ohio State Extension – Noble Co.
 - **Max D. Woodworth, PhD** | Associate Professor Department of Geography
 - **Jeffrey M. Bielicki, PhD** | Associate Professor Department of Civil, Environmental & Geodetic Engineering, The OSU Sustainability Institute, and the OSU John Glenn College of Public Affairs
 - **Thomas Dugdale, MFA** | Assistant Professor Department of Theatre, Film & Media Arts
 - **Mandy Fox, MFA** | Associate Professor Department of Theatre, Film & Media Arts
 - **Katie Finneran, MS** | Graduate Student, School of Environment & Natural Resources
 - **Elena Musser** | Honors Student, School of Environment & Natural Resources
 - **Brian Capobianco, MA** | Graduate Student, School of Environment & Natural Resources
 - **William Sharp** | Research Photographer, Curator, Archivist, School of Environment & Natural Resources

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Coshocton County Port Authority - <https://www.coshoctonportauthority.com>

Coshocton County Convention & Visitors Bureau - www.visitcoshocton.com

Memories of AEP Conesville on Facebook
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/236333544361037>

Additional Resources:

Initial Report to the President on Empowering Workers Through Revitalizing Energy Communities – Interagency Working Group on Coal and Power Plant Communities and Economic Revitalization – April 2021

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Socioeconomic Transition in the Appalachia Coal Region: Some Factors of Success

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