Testimony Before Environmental Protection Agency  
Regarding The Proposed Clean Power Plan (Clean Air Act Section 111[d])  

Stephen Wilkins, member Kentuckians For The Commonwealth  

July 29, 2014  
Atlanta, GA  

I am a Kentuckian and a member of our Commonwealth’s largest, true grassroots organization, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth. I am here to speak a truth different from the rhetoric that has been recently spewing from some of Kentucky’s so-called leaders; leaders beholden to large corporations—leaders who opposed the Clean Power Plan before they even knew what was in it.

I grew up, not in Kentucky, but in West Virginia. And not in West Virginia’s coalfields, but in what was then steel country. I remember seeing the sky glow orange at night as the huge blast furnaces shot sparks and sulphurous fumes skyward each time there was a “blow.” Snow-covered ground would turn grey with soot in just a few hours. I was too young to know that it was the frequent weather inversions that made my asthma and my sister’s asthma flare up. I lived just a couple of blocks from the Ohio River, an attractive place for a boy of thirteen; a place forbidden to play in or around because of the filth in the river. This river was, at the time, an open sewer with toilet residue floating by. That was before the EPA. That was before the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. That was the way business was done. Rivers burst into flames. Twenty people died and thousands were sickened from a pollutant-laden inversion in a town about 60 miles east of my home. Yet, it would be decades before America put the health of our children and of you and of me ahead of corporate bottom lines. Today, the pollutants we can see and smell are controlled much more and, yet, businesses still flourish.

Now we face a challenge we can neither see nor smell. We only know of its presence because of the data sent to us by satellite and ocean buoy; numbers given meaning by the world’s climate scientists. We only experience its consequences as our climate becomes more volatile. So, now America must step up once again and put the well-being of our children and our children’s children ahead of corporate profit margins. We do not have decades to get started with this.

I have been in a unique position, as a citizen and member of a grassroots organization, to have been at the table with electric utility executives, administrators and lawyers as part of a clean energy collaborative. Though I still consider myself a novice I’ve learned the lingo. I know a lot about baseload, dispatchable and variable generation; various types of power generating options; cost structures; de-coupling and automated metering. I’ve also learned a lot about energy efficiency and demand side management strategies. I’ve immersed myself in research on overcoming various barriers to advancing these strategies. And, I’m here to tell you that Kentucky has barely scratched the surface of what is possible.

Do not be swayed by those legislators and corporate interests who say that the Environmental Protection Agency is killing the economy and destroying jobs. They want business as usual. That’s understandable. It is easier to keep doing what you’ve been doing. That said, Kentucky – and the nation – have innovated and shifted in order to
create a better tomorrow. Just look at our rural electric cooperative system and you’ll see one innovation that propelled us out of the 19th century. Kentucky’s legislature has had bills before it the last several sessions that show a way forward to reducing fossil fuel based generation, while creating more jobs than continuing business as usual. Good jobs that can be had not just in urban Kentucky, but also in Appalachian Kentucky; a region that is fighting for survival now that the coal is almost gone. These bills not only create new employment options, they also keep electric rates in check far more than continuing business as usual. Analyses – top quality analyses – have been presented to the legislature showing a viable, rejuvenating way forward, yet these bills languish without even coming to a vote.

The proposed Clean Power Plan has set a very low bar for Kentucky. Louisville’s Courier-Journal stated that the coal-fired power plants already slated for decommissioning will take Kentucky most of the way towards the Clean Power Plan goal. The remaining seven percent reduction in coal-fired generation could easily be achieved through energy efficiency and demand side management. Far from imploring the Agency to scrap the Clean Power Plan as vested interests insist, I join many others here in saying that your plan is not bold enough. Kentucky and the nation can do even more. Any revisions to the Clean Power Plan should be done to create an even more robust carbon reduction goal. The costs of doing less are far too great for Kentuckians, Americans and all our relations across the world. We’ve already tarried for decades, just as we did in the fifties and sixties when we knew America needed a clean water act and a clean air act. We don’t have more time. The time is now. The actions bold. Thank you for being here to listen to ordinary folks such as me. Godspeed!