The National Commission on Energy Policy (NCEP) has long recognized the critical role that coal serves in the U.S. energy economy. Coal powers more than half the nation’s electric system today and remaining reserves are adequate to supply many decades more. As a low-cost, domestically secure, and relatively abundant resource, coal is an important energy supply option in this era of increasing economic and geopolitical insecurity. At the same time, NCEP recognizes that coal’s contribution going forward will depend on the development and deployment of new technologies to manage the global climate risks otherwise associated with carbon dioxide emissions from coal combustion. NCEP has been a leading voice for implementing pragmatic policy solutions that steadily transition our nation toward a low-carbon energy system. Successful commercialization of carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology, in particular, offers a path forward for reconciling continued use of coal with the need to reduce carbon emissions.

Beyond the climate-related challenges that are currently the subject of much debate, there are a host of related and mostly underappreciated issues associated with a continued reliance on domestic coal. Given that most policy efforts related to coal in recent years have focused on airborne emissions from coal-fired power plants, a large gap exists in the understanding of the total coal cycle. In particular, the implications of continued, or quite possibly increasing, coal consumption on the nation’s producing infrastructure do not appear to have received much attention. With this in mind, NCEP felt that an evenhanded study of coal production by a panel of nationally recognized and independent experts would be of tremendous value. Specifically, NCEP commissioned this report to explore different aspects of the coal supply chain and to highlight critical “upstream” fuel cycle issues that need to be addressed to ensure that the domestic coal industry can continue meeting the nation’s energy demands while delivering the social benefits and environmental performance demanded by the public.
NCEP recognizes the vital importance of good information for sound policymaking. It is our hope that this report will be seen as a constructive, balanced assessment of a set of issues that at times can become overtaken by emotion or dogma. We also wish to stress, however, that the study committee's analysis and recommendations were developed independently. As such, this report does not represent NCEP’s view or position on any particular issue. Given the caliber of the study group and the extent of the peer review process, we expect that this report will provide a strong foundation for future efforts to bring industry, government, and the nonprofit community together to advance improvements in the upstream coal sector that could provide a host of positive benefits for all. We thank Professor Michael Karmis of Virginia Tech, who chaired this study, and the members of the research team for their hard work and thoughtful exploration of these issues.

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