

**Coal at Sunset: A Colorado Town in Transition**  
**Episode 5: “No More Ghost Towns”**  
**Presented by the Institute for Science & Policy at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science along with House of Pod**

**KRISTAN UHLENBROCK (narration):** There are estimated to be more than a thousand ghost towns in Colorado. Each one represents a failed economic transition. So for Craig, Colorado, the stakes are clear. The nearby coal plant and coal mines are closing by the end of the decade. Hundreds of well-paying jobs will be going away. And as we heard in our previous episode, similar towns have struggled to survive when they don't have adequate resources.

Transitions need support like government funding, economic development, and community investments. Fortunately, help is on the way.

**WADE BUCHANAN:** Policy is my, kind of my home territory. It's what I find most fulfilling in my career, being able to work on problem solving in the public sector.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Wade Buchanan is a longtime Colorado policy pro. He's served three previous Governors in a variety of senior positions. He directed the State Energy Office and the State Department of Natural Resources. He ran a public policy think tank for 15 years. In other words, he knows his way around government. But with his graying hair, broad smile, and an easygoing demeanor, he's not what you'd expect from a bureaucrat. More like a friendly mountain guide. His Colorado roots run deep.

**WADE:** So I'm a fourth generation Coloradan. My family came here back in the 1920s, 19-teens, so probably over 100 years ago. I've never really lived for any long period of time anywhere else and don't think I would want to. Colorado is, is home. It's a very special place. And it's a very unique place, and there's a lot of diversity and in our own sort of way.

**KRISTAN (narration):** In 2019, Colorado passed its big climate action bill. That's the one that committed the state to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions 50% by 2030 and 90% by 2050. Those new targets signaled the beginning of the end for coal-fired power plants, which emit more carbon dioxide than any other energy source. Here's Governor Jared Polis:

**2020 CO GOV STATE OF THE STATE:** *This transition will mean lower energy costs and savings for ratepayers more renewable energy jobs, and reduced air pollution. It is a bold step to protect the future of the planet we all must inhabit.*

**KRISTAN (narration):** His administration also understood that the climate bill would have huge ramifications for towns like Craig. So that same spring, lawmakers passed another bill, creating a brand new Office of Just Transition to mitigate the impacts of coal closures.

**2020 CO GOV STATE OF THE STATE:** *... But we need to recognize the disruption caused to workers, families, and communities that are impacted by the private sector's turn away from coal. That's why I intend to work with utilities including Tri-State and our new Office of Just Transition to expand opportunities in renewable energy and help ensure that no worker and no community is left behind.*

**KRISTAN (narration):** It was the first state-level office of its kind in the U.S. And it was a public commitment to helping Colorado towns plan for a successful post-coal future. But it still needed somebody to lead it. Someone who could navigate the policy and politics of a complex issue. There weren't a lot of obvious fits. The director role sat vacant for months.

**WADE:** And they were actually having a challenge finding the right person for it.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Enter Wade Buchanan.

**WADE:** And I was feeling as though probably someone else could do my job in the Governor's office better. And the, the attraction of a job that got to focus on a specific challenge-was very appealing to me.

**KRISTAN (narration):** But it would be unlike any job Wade had ever held before.

**WADE:** It's an office of one.

**KRISTAN (narration):** That's right: Wade was the Office's first and only employee. He didn't have a budget to hire anyone else. He didn't have much of a budget for anything, really. The office began its existence understaffed and underfunded.

**WADE:** We expected that we would be operating in a position of austerity for quite a while.

**KRISTAN (narration):** So there he was, with no money and no roadmap...

**WADE:** I started the job the first day of March in 2020, -the same week that the first case of COVID was found in the state.

**KRISTAN (narration):** ...oh yeah, and a pandemic about to begin. Needless to say, this was going to be an uphill battle. And there was legitimate reason for skepticism. After all, wouldn't this just be repeating the same mistakes of the past? A bureaucratic office run by an outsider, without any funding? Some in Craig asked: why should we get our hopes up about that?

But Wade knew what he was getting into. He understood the broader forces at work.

**WADE:** At the global level and at the national level, this, this transition is all about moving from carbon based fuels to cleaner and newer fuels. At the local level and at the individual level, it's not about that at all. And we all need to stop thinking that it is. It's really about a community, being probably over dependent on one employer for a large share of its economic stability and its economic well-being.

**KRISTAN (narration):** He's hopeful that this time, things can be different.

**WADE:** Economic transitions are always disruptive. And this one, this energy transition, is equally disruptive. There are always winners and there are always losers. But there probably doesn't have to be as many losers as there have been in the past. The state has enough ghost towns. We have enough shuttered factories. I think our goal is to try to do the transition differently than it's been done in the past.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN (narration):** This is *Coal at Sunset: A Colorado Town in Transition*, presented by the Institute for Science & Policy at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. I'm your host, Kristan Uhlenbrock.

I want to return to a question we asked earlier in this series. What responsibility do we have to each other as Coloradans? What about as human beings? It's clear that communities in transition require support. And I think most of us would agree that *someone* should try to help coal workers. But who should that someone be? Private industry? Philanthropists? Individuals? The government?

In creating the Office of Just Transition, state legislators cited a moral obligation to Craig. And it's true that the government often plays an outsized role. When they're firing on all cylinders, state offices like Wade's can pull big levers that small towns can't. They can help navigate bureaucratic mazes and find grant opportunities. They can coordinate resources across numerous agencies and divisions. And they can assist with long-term strategies as communities plan for their future. But will that help even be welcome? President Ronald Reagan had a famous saying that many still agree with:

**RONALD REAGAN CLIP:** *The nine most terrifying words in the English language are, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help."*

**KRISTAN (narration):** Throughout this series, we've heard that rural communities are often skeptical of government assistance. They've been let down too many times in the past. Here's Colorado State Senator Bob Rankin:

**BOB RANKIN:** Most of my constituents feel strongly about controlling their own destiny. They would rather make decisions than have the state or federal government do that for them. So that's an issue that I think a lot about and work on -- putting control back in their hands, whether it's the school district, fire department, the local government.

**KRISTAN (narration):** We spoke with Senator Rankin earlier in our series. He represents Craig and much of Colorado's rural Western Slope. And he wasn't a fan of the Office of Just Transition when it was being considered in 2019.

**BOB:** I was extremely critical of the Just Transition office. I'll admit it. I actually went to the well in the Senate and said this bill is offensive. And what I meant by that is that title is quite lofty, isn't it? And it didn't have a nickel, not one dollar in there to really help.

**KRISTAN (narration):** It didn't help that this bill was passed in conjunction with the climate action bill. To some in Craig, it was like the legislature had amputated a limb and then offered them a band-aid.

**BOB:** People felt that they were being betrayed by their own government, for reasons they did not understand.

**KRISTAN (narration):** So Wade had his work cut out for him. He had to convince Craig that the state government was on their side. That it would come through this time. That he would come through.

**WADE:** We have to deliver in a way that's in partnership with them not showing up like hey, we've got the answer for you. We've figured out your future in Denver, or Washington D.C., and here it is, and fall in line, I mean I think there's a little bit of concern that that's what might be happening and, certainly, as long as I have something to say about it that's not at all what we're about or I wouldn't have taken the job. In my interactions with, you know, the governor and with others who are at the state level that the legislators -- that's not their intent either. But there's a long distance from intention to reality and it involves, you know, getting in at the ground, getting to know the people, rolling up your sleeves.

**KRISTAN (narration):** He wanted to start building relationships and repairing that trust. So he went out on the road.

**WADE:** My first week on the job, we were up in Moffat County and in Routt County for some very intense meetings with the citizenry in general but also workers and business sector and community leaders and governmental folks. I remember sitting at a table with three coal miners and their wives, and one of the wives who was so straightforward and so clear and said, you know I'm not going to believe anything you say until you come back. And that stuck with me. And it really underlined that what we have to do is deliver.

**KRISTAN (narration):** But the timing couldn't have been worse. COVID-19 put a freeze on travel. The pandemic prevented Wade from returning to the Western Slope for the rest of 2020. Like so many, Wade found himself working from home. The crucial in-person components of his job were stalled out. He couldn't help but feel like valuable days and weeks were ticking away.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN (narration):** All that summer, Wade tried to identify the elements of other failed transitions so that he could avoid the same mistakes. He studied the rise and fall of other Colorado towns that we've mentioned previously, like Kremmling and Pueblo. As he thought about how those examples might apply to Craig, one important principle jumped out at him.

**WADE:** Build on your strengths. Don't pretend you're a community that you're not, or that you're not capable of being and that sounds a little, little pejorative. I don't mean it that way. But every community has its strengths. No town in Colorado is going to be having an ocean view. So don't plan on that, right. Don't, don't put yourself in a place in the future where the loss of one business becomes such a huge challenge, if you can avoid it.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Wade wanted to start listening. So he reached out virtually to Jennifer Holloway. She's the Executive Director of the Craig Chamber of Commerce, whom you may remember from previous episodes. She thinks Craig is already in a strong position to attract small businesses.

**JENNIFER:** Craig is a great place to start a business, everything is very low cost here right now. So if you're in Colorado and you're trying to start a business, we're gonna beat your prices probably as far as buying a warehouse or purchasing land or, or anything like that. I think we're

gonna see more small entrepreneurial startups with very creative industries, maybe something that you can ship all out all over the world, or sell a bunch in Steamboat.

**KRISTAN (narration):** But a few small startups alone aren't going to cut it. Wade and Jennifer talked bluntly about the tidal wave of economic disruption headed Craig's way. Moffat County stands to lose over \$150 million in assessed property tax value once the coal plant and coal mines close.

**WADE:** Every community around the country that faces the closure of a coal-fired power plant faces some significant tax base loss. That means the schools, that means the streets, that means the ability of the community to be an ongoing concern and to plan for its future. And it's a significant challenge, especially if the numbers are going to be as big as they will be in Moffat County.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Jennifer told Wade some of the other things she hoped his office could provide for a community grappling with change.

**JENNIFER:** So, what resources would be great would be alternative workforce placement training, education on options. I mean I think we're gonna need some real mental health and career counseling. We need to holistically help each of these individuals and families.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Oh, and one more thing:

**JENNIFER:** Money. Give us a bunch of money. Please. I'll help us spend it.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Wade promised he'd do what he could. And in theory, it all sounds so simple. Pour money and resources into towns in transition and they'll be okay. But I got the sense from Jennifer that there's more to it than that. The end of coal is still a raw, emotional topic in Craig. For the town to move forward and get the closure it needs, it might need more than just numbers on a spreadsheet.

**JENNIFER:** A big thing is that, if there's a way to show empathy, instead of vilifying us, like, I feel like the coal miners -- and this is all over the country we're not the only coal mining town going through this -- but we're not the bad guys, just because we were in an industry that the nation needed at that time, that was the best industry at the time, it was the way to make electricity. And now all of a sudden -- not all of a sudden, okay -- but it's finally here, this change that we've been avoiding. Tell us thanks. I mean can Denver send us a big card say, hey thanks for all this work you've done for this electricity, we know you're changing we know your town's going through hard, hard, hard times and we're just, we understand.

**KRISTAN (narration):** We asked earlier about taking responsibility for helping coal communities because Wade can't do it alone. Tri-State, the electrical utility company that's closing the plant and mines in Craig, certainly bears some of that obligation.

CEO Duane Highley, who spoke with us in our first episode, knows that his utility can't just up and leave without offering some kind of financial help. He recently oversaw another coal plant closure in New Mexico.

**DUANE HIGHLEY:** We had to really take a hard look at the coal facility we operated in New Mexico called the Escalante plant near Grants, New Mexico. And that was a couple hundred employees, very significant impact again because that is an area where there aren't really other employers. They saw the writing on the wall. They knew that coal is not gonna run forever. And they had made plans. So we were able to plug into their plans and say well, we'll provide funding, and so we provided \$5 million for their transition plan, which really helped kick start it.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Craig is hoping for a similar level of community investment from Tri-State over the next decade. And so far, there's been some. The company has already offered to pay for education and retraining for any coal employee who wants to change careers. And in the fall of 2020, Tri-State installed a new quarter of a million dollar indoor agriculture facility at the Moffat County high school.

**DUANE:** We call it a Farm in a Box. Kind of a wacky thing, but it's growing plants indoors with special lighting with complete control of all the variables. And if you think about high mountain or high mountain desert areas, you can't grow in the winter, but this can eliminate food deserts, and you can take the downtown closed storefronts, you know, an old Walmart, you know, some building that what do you do with it? And if you could deploy indoor ag, and you can grow fresh produce year round and now you're not having to track this in from who knows where, California, whatever, and a place that really didn't have any fresh produce can have it right there and have some jobs. Seems like a win win.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Projects like that are a start, Duane says. He knows that many expect him to do more. He hopes he'll be able to. The decision to close the coal facilities in Craig still weighs on him, because he knows what can happen.

**DUANE:** You know, so I can say I've seen both sides of it and know there's a way out. I mean there's better tools at our disposal today through the Office of Just Transition that Colorado has created. There's other grant money that wouldn't have been available to us decades ago. Wade is so enthusiastic, in terms of the potential for what we're trying to do in Craig. And he's just, he's ready, willing and able to help. And he just could use a little more money, I'd say. If I could give away a gift, I'd give him, you know, 100 million dollars, and that would be a big help. So, you know, he's a great resource for that community in terms of his enthusiasm for the transition.

**KRISTAN (narration):** In the chaos of early 2020, the odds of Wade coming across that huge windfall seemed low. The pandemic had sent the U.S. economy into freefall. Budget shortfalls loomed. There was no choice for Wade but to keep operating on a shoestring. The steps that he and Jennifer and others in Craig had come up with - economic diversification, attracting new businesses, investing in infrastructure - all looked good on paper. But for now, their plan was only that: paper.-The uncertainty of it all still nagged Wade. He wondered if all of his efforts would be enough when it really came down to it.

**WADE:** We're talking about events that are still years away, and the idea that, you know, we know exactly what's going to happen and we can write a plan and say here's our final plan for

something that's going to happen 5, 6, 7 years from now, just a ridiculous thought. We have to pay attention to quality, the quality of the jobs, the quality of the benefits, the nature of the work that's coming into the community. And if we were just too simplistic about it. We could really screw this thing up.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN (narration):** There's another big question hanging over the work that Wade is doing. What is a "just transition?" What is "fair?" And who gets to decide? After all, there are only so many taxpayer dollars to go around. There's a devil's advocate case to be made that when sectors like coal begin to fade away, that's just free market economics at work. Wade has considered these questions too. And he rejects the framing.

**WADE:** This is not a zero sum game. It is not about pitting different people against their interests, against one another. It's about a significant transition that's happening in communities and to families and that's happening for bigger reasons. And how are we as a society going to recognize our obligation to not have the communities turn into ghost towns. And how are we going to think about a different way of transitioning as a society?

**KRISTAN (narration):** We've heard throughout this series that coal jobs are well-paying jobs. And it's true. They typically pay around \$100,000 a year and don't require a bachelor's degree. Coal workers will also have access to education and career retraining resources through Tri-State. There's an inherent tension in the state helping out those who are pretty well off relative to their neighbors. But Wade says the need is broader than that.

**WADE:** The reason for the buy in, broadly, is in part to ensure that everyone benefits from this process. And if you come at it from a point of view of a zero sum game, then I think you're going to really limit your imagination. It's not at all what we're -- certainly what my office is about. I don't think it's what the communities are thinking about. We are going to work with the individuals who get laid off. They are mid-career. Some of them are close to retirement. They have some of the best jobs in the community. True. They also, as a result, are important to that community's economy. I don't think anybody should begrudge that people who work that hard, are paid well and have the kind of benefits everybody should have. I think we should begrudge the fact that others don't. So that's the challenge in the communities. Can we do this, can we take care of these folks who through no fault of their own, are having their careers deeply, deeply disrupted.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Ultimately, this question isn't going away. It's a significant consideration in the energy transition. For Wade, his focus remains on the workers.

**WADE:** The disequity in our society is not the fault of these miners, and not the fault of the power plant workers, nor are they responsible for why we're in the predicament we are that is driving the necessity of this transition. They're just hard workers who've done what they've been asked to do and they've powered a great deal of our prosperity, and I do think we owe them, you know, good faith and while we're at it, we owe good faith to other folks who have been left behind and we can do both those things.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN (narration):** We can see now that there's another transition taking place here in the state. There seems to be a new mindset in Colorado government about how to support workers in disappearing industries. It's a more creative approach to community input and engagement.

The fact that Wade's office even exists -- and that he and others are grappling with these tough questions around Craig -- is a sign that we're all thinking about the issue in a different way.

The Office of Just Transition survived its challenging second year, pandemic and all. Wade published his draft roadmap on the final day of 2020, outlining a detailed series of recommendations for Craig. It prioritized new business development, infrastructure investments, and direct grant assistance. Overall, the plan was well-received, even by former critics like Senator Rankin.

**BOB:** So what's evolved since is, they wrote a plan, you know, it's nice. It's more than just a plan. It's actually a checklist of local initiatives. So that's what I have been very supportive of.

**KRISTAN (narration):** And, fortunately, Colorado's budget had also found its footing. Federal COVID-19 stimulus dollars had started to roll in. The state of the economy wasn't as dire as feared. Things were starting to look up for actually funding the Office of Just Transition. In the spring of 2021, Senator Rankin co-sponsored a bi-partisan bill with an infusion of cash for Wade.

**WADE:** We ended up with a bill that is giving the office \$15 million over the next two years, which will be a wonderful foundational capacity for us to, to, to lay the groundwork.

**BOB:** I actually lobbied hard for that bill. I wanted to put some money, I wanted to get some money actually funded to the locals to help with their plan, with their initiatives. And my discussions with the Just Transition Office were very good. I mean, Wade said, Yeah, I'm all over the fact that initiatives should come from locals. That's the ones that will work. You know, lofty retraining, you can't retrain coal workers to work in a souvenir shop. So we had those discussions. I wanted to just block grant that money directly to that region. But that was hard to do. I couldn't get that done. So I was happy to, you know, put \$15 million through the just transition office -- that bill reads, it says coal community transition. So I feel like that is going to be funneled directly to that local set of initiatives that you will see.

**KRISTAN (narration):** The bill passed overwhelmingly. The Office of Just Transition finally had a budget. And now, Wade won't be going it alone any more.

**WADE:** In part because of those added resources, we're also able to hire. So we are now a mighty office of two people and we'll be, in another month or two, a mighty office of about four people.

**KRISTAN (narration):** He hopes that more significant resources will eventually arrive from Washington D.C. The Biden administration is prioritizing infrastructure investments in cleaner energy.

**WADE:** Can we find a way from the federal level to help in the short term, because these numbers get too big for the state to handle, frankly. Can the federal government help over a

transition period, maybe on a sliding scale, net that out in a way that is more manageable for communities?

**KRISTAN (narration):** And it's true: The energy transition is very much a part of the conversation in our nation's capital right now. As we record this in fall of 2021, Congress is debating a multi-trillion dollar infrastructure package that includes resources for transitioning coal communities. Its chances of passage, however, are uncertain. But no matter what ends up happening in Washington, in Colorado- funding the Office of Just Transition was a watershed moment. Legislators had fulfilled their initial promise not to abandon towns like Craig.

As for Wade himself? After months and months of struggle, dare I say...he was feeling something like hope.

**WADE:** Yeah, I do think I'm optimistic about it. It may be absolutely essential that this transition happens from a climate point of view. We may not have a choice about that. But we do have a choice about how the communities and the workers experience it. And that is a different way of approaching a major economic disruption than often has been the case in the past and that's what's exciting about this job. Our state is dotted with ghost towns. And they're beautiful and picturesque, you know, now hundreds, a hundred years after they folded. But they're all testaments to failed transitions. And we have an opportunity to get ahead of the curve, and do a transition that isn't a failure but a success. And that's what's exciting to me. It is possible. It's not easy, but it's worth trying. And if we succeed. It's kind of hard to imagine many things more important.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN (narration):** On the next episode of *Coal at Sunset*, what do dinosaur bones and artist studios have to do with the future of Craig? We look at some of the new and surprising economic opportunities that could drive the town's post-coal future. Be sure to subscribe to this series wherever you get your podcasts.

Coal at Sunset was created by the Institute for Science & Policy, a project of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, produced in partnership with House of Pod. I'm your host, Kristan Uhlenbrock. This show was written by Trent Knoss. Our producer is Juliette Luini. Our executive producers are Trent Knoss and me, Kristan Uhlenbrock. Our field recorders are Nicole Delaney and Juliette Luini.

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