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James Rogers, 71, Dies; Utility Chief and Clean Energy Advocate

By **Julie Creswell**

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James E. Rogers, who as chief executive of Duke Energy emerged as one of the industry's most passionate supporters of sustainable energy, died on Dec. 17 in Louisville, Ky. He was 71.

His wife, Mary Anne Rogers, said Mr. Rogers, who lived in Charlotte, N.C., had been in Louisville visiting family and died of sepsis in a hospital there.

After spending years leading smaller regional electric utility companies, Mr. Rogers was named president and chief executive of Duke Energy following its 2006 merger with the Cinergy Corporation, a Midwest utility. Duke, headquartered in Charlotte, had dozens of coal-burning electric plants scattered around the Midwest and the Carolinas and was frequently targeted by environmentalists for its greenhouse gas emissions.

Mr. Rogers occupied a challenging position in a quickly changing world. While under pressure by environmentalists to reduce emissions, utility leaders like Mr. Rogers were also expected to create reasonably priced power for customers and profits for shareholders.

But Mr. Rogers proved to be an anomaly among utility chiefs, who were often quick to dismiss green activists. He not only held extensive meetings and talks with the company's environmental critics; he also went several steps further, actively lobbying Washington for stricter regulation of greenhouse gases.

During his tenure, Duke Energy began to reduce its own carbon emissions and made significant investments in renewable energy projects.

James Eugene Rogers Jr. was born on Sept. 20, 1947, in Birmingham, Ala., and grew up in Danville, Ky., where his mother, Margaret, worked in the home and his father worked for the Southern Railroad.

While attending the University of Kentucky, Mr. Rogers worked as a reporter at The Lexington Herald-Leader, covering the police and the courts. After graduating, he attended the University of Kentucky College of Law and worked as a consumer advocate, challenging the rate increases of utility companies for the Kentucky attorney general, before moving on to numerous legal positions both in government and in the private sector.

In 1988 he was offered the job of turning around an Indiana electrical utility, PSI Energy, which was teetering on the verge of bankruptcy after environmentalists forced it to halt the construction of a nuclear plant, resulting in a \$2.7 billion write-off. Rather than dismiss the environmentalists, Mr. Rogers met with them to find a way to get the company on firmer ground. In 1994, PSI merged with Cincinnati Gas & Electric, creating the Cinergy Corporation, with Mr. Rogers as chairman and chief executive.

Throughout the 1990s, as concerns about climate change entered the public debate, Mr. Rogers began meeting with climate experts. In 2001, he shocked a room of fellow energy executives when he declared that the industry should work to pass a federal carbon cap, a law that would strictly limit the amount of carbon dioxide produced in the United States and impose enormous costs on any company that releases more carbon than its assigned limit.

“They were stunned,” Ralph Cavanagh, an energy program director at the Natural Resources Defense Council who was present at the meeting, said in a 2008 New York Times Magazine piece about Mr. Rogers titled “A Green Coal Baron?” “That was the first time I had heard a major energy executive say anything like this. But because he was chairman of their energy committee, he wasn’t just a flaky maverick.”

After the merger with Cinergy, Mr. Rogers became Duke Energy’s chief executive. He astonished the company’s board of directors about a year later by presenting a plan to “decarbonize” Duke by 2050, effectively revamping the utility so that it would emit very little carbon dioxide.

Duke Energy has slowly been retiring its coal-fired generating plants, largely with natural gas facilities. In 2005, 58 percent of the company’s energy generation came from coal. By 2017, that figure had fallen to 33 percent.

After retiring from Duke Energy in 2013, Mr. Rogers devoted much of his attention to how rural people in low-income nations could gain access to clean, sustainable energy. In 2015 he published “Lighting the World,” a book that explored this topic, advocating for sustainable energy development for parts of the world that remain without electricity.

Mr. Rogers’s first marriage ended in divorce. In addition to his wife, he is survived by a son, Benjamin; two daughters, Christine Morgan and Kara Black; a brother, Michael; two sisters, Cheri Unger and Candace Fox; eight grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

Correction: December 24, 2018

An earlier version of this obituary referred incorrectly to Mr. Rogers’s stint as a reporter at The Lexington Herald-Leader. He worked there while attending the University of Kentucky, not after he graduated.

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