

China's Coal Frenzy Cancels America's CO2 Emission Reductions

Americans are Footing the Climate Bill for China's Coal Plants

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"Despite Pledges to Cut Emissions, China Goes on a Coal Spree", reads the headline of a recent posting in [YaleEnvironment360](#), the [online magazine of Yale University's School of the Environment](#). The subtext might have been, "and Americans are paying for it".

America's workers, businesses and consumers are already paying a high price for the Administration's efforts to lower U.S. carbon emissions. The price comes in the form of lost jobs, cancelled pipelines and their negative community impacts, higher energy costs and higher prices for everyday products delivered by truck, rail, sea or air transportation.

Americans are on the hook for China's excesses because while we're investing in climate mitigation, China's coal spree will for years continue to more than offset significant greenhouse gas emission reductions achieved in America through greater use of natural gas, renewables, innovation and other investments.

China's coal power plant building reached new heights in 2020, with approvals of 46 gigawatts (GW) of newly added capacity, according to the Global Energy Monitor's (GEM) February 2021 Briefing entitled "[China Dominates 2020 Coal Plant Development](#)". That brings China's 5-year (2016-2020) total of approved additions to coal generating capacity to 145 GW. When online by 2025, those new plants will bring China's total coal capacity to 1,100 GW, well more than half of the entire world's current operating coal fleet of 2,059 GW.

The GEM report's other key findings include:

- China commissioned 38.4 GW of new coal plants in 2020, over three times the 11.9 GW commissioned in the rest of the world.
- China's coal fleet grew by net 29.8 GW in 2020, while in the rest of the world's net capacity decreased by 17.2 GW.
- China initiated 73.5 GW of new coal plant proposals in 2020, over five times the 13.9 GW initiated in the rest of the world combined.
- China now has 247 GW of coal power under development (88.1 GW under construction and 158.7 GW proposed for construction), nearly six times Germany's entire coal-fired capacity of 42.5 GW.

By comparison, while China adds aggressively to its coal capacity over the next several years, [America's coal fleet continues to shrink towards zero](#), with 64 GW of capacity retiring from 2015 to 2020, and another 62 GW going offline by 2030. With no new plants on the drawing boards, that will leave us with just 114 GW remaining, assuming current retirement plans are not further accelerated. That compares to China's 247 GW under development.

Along with America's coal capacity retirements, our utilization of remaining capacity continues to shrink. [According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration](#), "coal-fired power plants are retiring (from 320 GW in 2009 to 240 GW in 2019), and those that remain operating are being used less (from 65% of capacity in 2009 to 47% of capacity in 2019), leading to even faster declines in coal-fired electricity generation (from 1.7 million gigawatt hours in 2009 to .9 million gigawatt hours in 2019)"

Needless to say, declining U.S. coal generation and related CO₂ emissions will continue to be made possible by our abundance of natural gas and the infrastructure to produce, deliver and use it. Natural gas generation picks up the base load at substantially lower cost and greatly reduced CO₂ emissions, not to mention close to zero emissions of other pollutants and the complete absence of post-combustion residual matter like coal's fly ash.

The Administration's early actions together with ongoing state and local policies that constrain natural gas production, cancel pipelines, deny project permits, ban natural gas hookups and more, serve only to impoverish energy workers, affected communities and consumers in the name of greenhouse gas reductions that are overwhelmed daily by ever-growing Chinese emissions.

Meanwhile, America and the rest of the world have given China a free pass to continue emissions growth by accepting their Paris Climate Accord commitment, not to reduce emissions, but only to stop them from rising starting in 2030. This makes China's commitment to be carbon-neutral by 2060 seem hollow and unachievable.

Rather, some of America's emissions-reduction money would be well spent if President Biden would direct International Climate Envoy John Kerry to spend some time every day devising ways for America and our allies to bring pressure on China to curtail its emissions starting now, not in 2030.

America's energy workers and companies look forward to the day when lost jobs and damaged businesses are not regarded as unfortunate but unavoidable collateral damage in the push to a lower carbon American economy; while China, already by far the world's biggest carbon emitter and getting bigger by the day, continues to more than offset our progress.