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Coal

Britain's last coal power plants to close by 2025

Government to phase out the most polluting fossil and replace it with cleaner sources, such as gas, to meet climate commitments

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Campaigners are calling for UK's coal power plants to close even earlier than 2025. Photograph: David Jones/PA

The last coal power station in Britain will be forced to close in 2025, the government said as it laid out its plan to phase-out the polluting fossil fuel.

Ministers promised last year that the UK would close coal power within a decade and replace it with gas and other sources to meet its climate change commitments.

But in a delayed consultation on the phase-out, published on Wednesday, officials admitted that the last coal power station was likely to shutter in 2022 even without government intervention, prompting calls from campaigners to bring forward the cut-off year.

Greg Clark, the energy secretary, said the move sent a clear signal to the world that the UK was a good place to invest in clean energy. "Taking unabated coal power out of our energy mix and replacing it with cleaner technology, such as gas, will significantly reduce emissions from the UK's energy use," he said.

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The government also confirmed renewable energy would receive £730m in support this parliament, and that bids for £290m of support annually would be opened from next April. Most of that is likely to be taken by offshore windfarm developers, which will receive at least £105 per megawatt hour of electricity generated if built in 2021, considerably lower than the £135 for ones deployed in 2018.

While admitting that recent history has shown coal power plants can close at short notice, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said its analysis suggested taking action on coal posed no risks to electricity supplies.

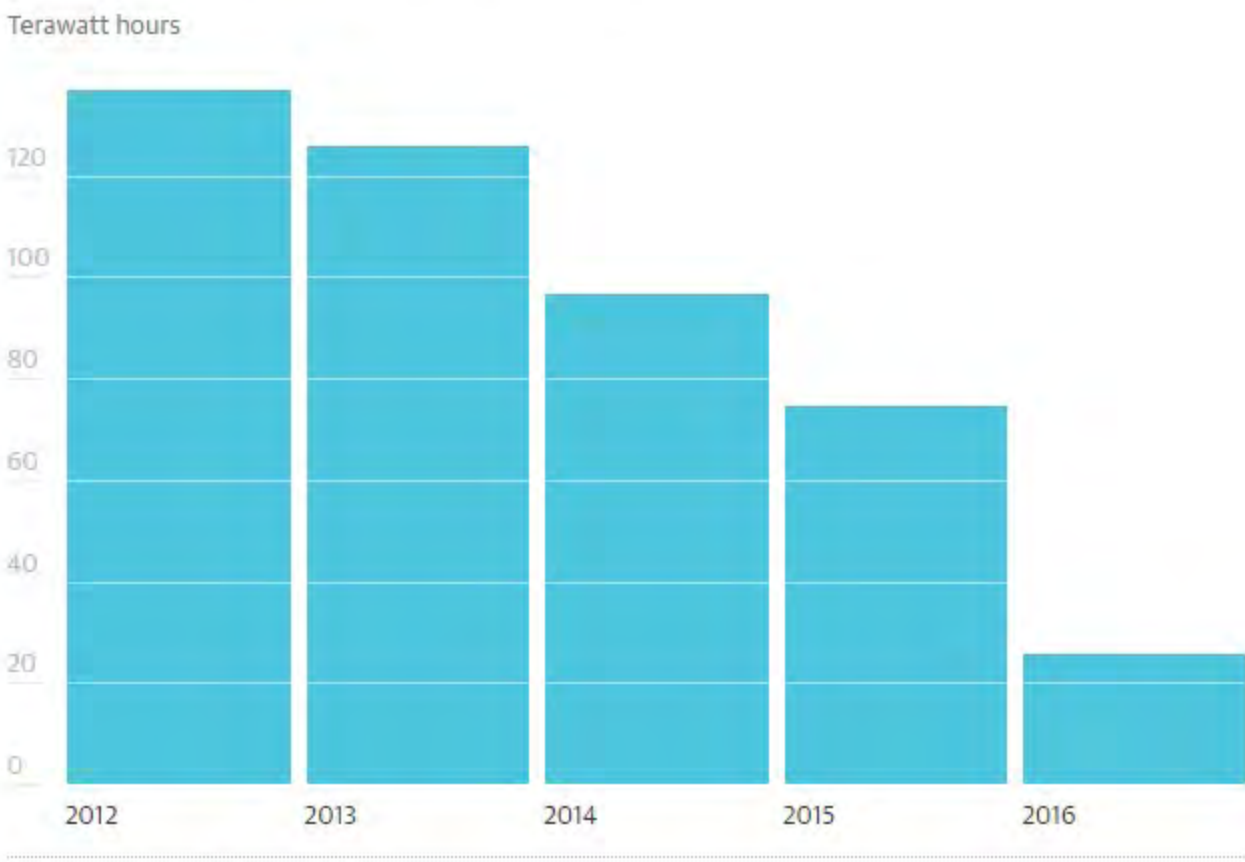
The department is consulting on two options for effectively forcing the UK's last eight coal power stations to close by 2025 at the very latest. Both involve changes to the Emissions Power Standard, which sets a limit on new coal power plants' annual carbon emissions based on their capacity, and which the UK's ageing fleet would be unable to meet.

Officials expect that because air pollution and climate change measures are making coal uneconomic, the most likely scenario is that all coal power plants will close by 2022. But they also said that if the price of coal was low it was conceivable they would not close until 2030. They said this uncertainty showed the need for intervention.

Ben Caldecott, associate fellow of the thinktank Bright Blue, called for the end date to be brought forward. "There are significant benefits of phasing coal out sooner, rather than later. We believe that the 2025 target should be brought forward by at least two years to give investors greater certainty to invest, which will improve security of supply."

Coal power generation in the UK is estimated to drop 66% in 2016

Generation for November and December 2016 is estimated



Most green groups and climate change commentators welcomed the move and commended the government. WWF said ministers should strongly resist any attempts to water down the phase-out. Friends of the Earth applauded the government and said it should now block a proposed opencast coal mine in Northumberland, given the UK was no longer planning to burn the fuel.

Christiana Figueres, the former UN climate chief, said: "Congratulations to UK government for the consultation on coal phase-out. Coal needs to take its rightful place in history of yesterday. Coal workers need to be given a fresh chance at the jobs of tomorrow."

The government acknowledges the potential human cost of coal power stations shuttering, saying plant closures could have a "significant impact on communities" as they employed around 100-500 people directly.

The only way the coal plants could stay open would be if they fitted technology to capture and store the carbon emissions, though officials said that was "considered unlikely". The other option is that they convert to burning another fuel, such as biomass, a process which is complete at two of the six units at Drax, the UK's biggest power station, and is nearly finished on a third.

"We recognise coal is a fuel of the past and using the latest technology we have already upgraded half the power Station to run on sustainable biomass," said a spokesman for Drax, which welcomed the consultation. "The majority of electricity we now produce is renewable, providing UK homes and businesses with low carbon, affordable and reliable power."

Electricity generation from the UK's coal plants has already declined steeply, and is expected to have fallen 66% by the year's end, compared to 2015. There are no coal plants left in Scotland after the last one, at Longannet, closed in the spring. Gas has taken up most of the slack this year, and is expected to replace most of the capacity provided as coal plants close in coming years.

Michael Grubb, professor of International Energy and Climate Change Policy at UCL, said: "Outlining how and when coal plants will cease to operate will pave the way for new investment, including gas. Coal is already struggling economically and removing coal clarifies the market space for gas during the 2020s."

ClientEarth, an environmental NGO that successfully won a legal case against the government on air pollution plans, cautioned that while a coal phase-out was welcome, the UK should focus on clean energy to replace it, rather than gas.

"The UK government must make sure it isn't problem-shifting. Putting a sell-by date on coal is logical, but the UK must be bolder and the deadline should be sooner," said Susan Shaw, a lawyer at the organisation.

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