

Coal power pipeline shrinks dramatically in boon for climate

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A freeze on projects in China and India gives fresh hope of meeting tough global warming limits, according to a report by Coal Swarm, Greenpeace and Sierra Club



China has excess coal power capacity and a big problem with air pollution (Photo: Nian Shan/Greenpeace)

By Megan Darby

The capacity of coal plants in pre-construction planning worldwide nearly halved in 2016, boosting hopes of averting dangerous climate change.

After a decade-long coal boom, government intervention in China and a finance crunch in India are shrinking the pipeline of power stations.

It improves the odds of meeting international climate goals, a report by Coal Swarm, Greenpeace and Sierra Club said on Wednesday.

“This has been a messy year, and an unusual one,” said Ted Nace, director of Coal Swarm. “It’s not normal to see construction frozen at scores of locations, but central authorities in China and bankers in India have come to recognize overbuilding of coal plants as a major waste of resources.”

Coal Swarm’s coal plant tracker, a comprehensive database drawn on by influential bodies like the International Energy Agency, shows a slowdown at every stage of development. The volume of capacity on the drawing board fell from 1,100GW in January 2016 to 570GW in January 2017. The number to start construction dropped 62% to 65GW and the total under construction went from 340GW to 270GW.

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As the most prolific builder of coal plants, China made the biggest course correction. Beijing ordered provincial authorities to halt projects judged to be no longer necessary. “Astonishing clean energy growth has made new coal-fired power plants redundant, with all additional power needs covered from non-fossil sources since 2013,” said Lauri Myllyvirta, campaigner at Greenpeace.

More surprisingly, India’s latest National Electricity Plan showed no need for further plants beyond those already under construction. Despite huge latent demand, with around one in three Indians off the power grid, some stations have been idling. Affordability and a lack of network infrastructure remain barriers to access – and financiers are getting cold feet.

Meanwhile, 27GW of power stations closed last year, mostly in richer countries. President Donald Trump has promised to scrap curbs on US coal power production, but the sector still faces tough competition from shale gas and renewables. Nicole Ghio, of the Sierra Club, said: “Markets are demanding clean energy, and no amount of rhetoric from Donald Trump will be able to stop the fall of coal in the US and across the globe.”

Overall, newly built coal plants outnumbered retirements last year, increasing global capacity by 3%. There will need to be a further shift away from the polluting fuel to meet the Paris Agreement target of holding global warming “well below 2C”, the analysis warned.

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