Australia: Greenhouse emissions stable over decade as GDP grew 31%

July 31 2013, by Sunanda Creagh

Steam and other emissions rise from a Sydney factory. The new report identified potential for nearly three times more emissions reduction activity than is currently being observed. AAP Image/Mick Tsikas

There has been no growth in greenhouse gas emissions in Australia over the last decade, despite economic growth of 31% over the same period, a new report has found.

The findings show that conversion to a green economy need not be

painful and is already underway in Australian industry.

The report, released today by Monash University research unit ClimateWorks, said stable emissions levels despite economic growth was achieved through reduced deforestation, increased tree-planting, a big boost in industry energy efficiency and sharp drops in power emissions.

However, a lot more needs to be done if catastrophic climate change is to be avoided, the study found.

Despite the progress so far, Australia is on track to achieve only about 40% of the reductions needed to meet its minimum national target of reducing domestic emissions by 5% below year 2000 emissions levels by 2020.

Report co-author and head of research at ClimateWorks, Amandine Denis, said previous climate science research has found that Australia should reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 25% below year 2000 levels by 2020 to keep levels of atmospheric greenhouse gases 450 ppm carbon dioxide equivalent or lower.

Keeping atmospheric greenhouse gases at that level provides a chance to limit the global increase in temperature to 2°C, previous projections have shown.

"What our analysis has found is this is achievable in Australia with domestic activity with technology available today. We can do more than what is currently being aimed for," said Ms Denis.

The researchers identified potential for nearly three times more emissions reduction activity than is currently being observed.

"The large areas of potential abatement are mostly in the power and land

sectors: by replacing further coal generated power plants with renewables and gas, reducing deforestation and increasing afforestation further and increasing energy efficiency in the building sector," she said.

Emissions stable—now, to reduce them

Pep Canadell, Global Carbon Project executive-director at CSIRO, welcomed the report.

"The report brings good news and shows that the implementation of key energy and land use policies are beginning to pay off, and that it is possible to decouple economic growth from emissions growth," said Dr Canadell, who was not involved in the study.

"There is an opportunity to explore in detail which policies have worked and which haven't based on their contributions to the stabilisation of emissions and economic growth. It is important to realise that, ultimately, we need to achieve the complete decarbonisation of the energy system, and this requires the continued development of new policy to address the increasingly harder components of the transformation required."

Chris Riedy, Associate Professor at the University of Technology, Sydney's Institute for Sustainable Futures, said the findings align with data from Australia's National Greenhouse Gas Inventory.

"Australia's total emissions have been relatively stable over the last decade. Reductions in emissions from land clearing and waste have offset ongoing increases in emissions from other sectors. The recent decline in electricity demand and associated emissions has been really important in halting the overall growth in emissions," said Associate Professor Reidy, who was not involved in the new study.

"Now that Australia has successfully halted the growth in its total emissions, it's time to start actually reducing emissions. The report shows that Australia has the potential to aim higher than its current target of a 5% reduction in emissions by 2020. A commitment to a 25% reduction in emissions by 2020 is feasible, is more consistent with what climate scientists are telling us is needed and would reinvigorate international climate negotiations."

More information: www.climateworksaustralia.org/ … s-low-carbon-economy

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