

# Coal-addicted Poland gears for key UN climate talks

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View of the Belchatow coal-fired power plant in central Poland, on September 28, 2011

The UN climate talks opening in Warsaw next week will not be without a touch of irony.

The chair of a high-stakes meeting to roll back greenhouse gases is none other than Poland, one of the world's most ardent users and outspoken

defenders of [coal](#).

Poland's dependence on cheap and plentiful black stuff means it ranks fifth for carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) pollution in the European Union (EU), behind Germany, Britain, Italy and France, whose economies are far bigger.

Coal accounts for about 90 percent of the electricity used by Poland's 38 million people—and, say experts, there is enough of it to last for another century and a half.

"We want to have [renewable energy sources](#), but hard coal and lignite—and soon shale gas—will remain our principal energy sources. That's where the future of the energy sector lies," Prime Minister Donald Tusk said in September.

But coal addiction carries a burden, for the environment locally and for Poland's reputation abroad, especially in environmentally-sensitive Europe.

Seeking a way out of the dilemma, Deputy Prime Minister and Economy Minister Janusz Piechocinski will open a "coal and [climate summit](#)" on November 18 and 19—hosted by the World Coal Association—that will showcase prospects for cleaner coal, including sequestering carbon emissions from power plants.

Poland's price for coal

One of Poland's most notorious coal problems is smog, especially in the southern tourist city of Krakow, which plans to outlaw coal-burning household stoves this month.

"Here, EU limits on CO<sub>2</sub> are exceeded for more than half of the year,

sometimes several times over. It's a situation that almost resembles Beijing," said Anna Dworakowska, a representative of the Alarm against coal pollution in Krakow environmental group, told AFP.



An excavator works in a open-cast mine in Belchatow, central Poland, on September 28, 2011

Poland has raised hackles within the EU by torpedoing a drive to reduce CO2 emissions by removing the dirtiest fossil fuels from the 28-nation bloc's energy mix.

It has also vetoed plans to slash the EU's greenhouse-gas emissions by 40 percent in 2030, 60 percent in 2040 and 80 percent in 2050, compared to 1990s levels.

It insists such targets cannot be set without first doing an in-depth

analysis of the costs.

Warsaw insists it has already put a dent in its emissions by ramping up energy efficiency in sectors that are heavy carbon polluters, such as cement, paper and steelmaking.

"Poland has one of Europe's highest levels of curbing emissions—a 32-percent reduction since 1988," a source close to its climate negotiating team told AFP without wishing to be named.

"It falls within the European average in terms of the intensity of emissions," the source said.

These figures, though, include the closure of mammoth Communist-era plants that were doomed to fail when Poland made its transition to a market economy.

A country that hosts the "COP"—the annual Conference of the Parties under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—has to play a vital role in brokering a deal.

It has to wheedle, sometimes knock heads together, or even ram through an accord despite dissent.

Is there a conflict of interest for coal-loving Poland to take on this job?

Even Poland's critics say this is unlikely.

COP veterans say a country's success in the chair depends more on the skills of its environment minister and the clout and reach of its diplomatic corps, and any partiality is scented miles off.

Judged on this scorecard, Poland was praised in 2008 when it chaired a

difficult "COP" in Poznan a year before the 2009 climate summit in Copenhagen.

"My sense is that they won't do a bad job (in Warsaw)," said one observer with experience of more than 13 "COP"s.

"The Qataris didn't do a bad job either," he added, referring to last year's marathon, hosted by gas-rich Qatar—the world's biggest carbon emitter per capita.

Qatar got high marks for gavelling through a deal to extend the troubled Kyoto Protocol on climate change, in the face of angry protests from Russia.

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