

# US exports help Germany increase coal, pollution

July 28 2014, by Kirsten Grieshaber

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This image provided by Trianel on July 24, 2013, shows an undated aerial view on the Trianel power plant in Luenen, western Germany. The 750-megawatt Trianel power plant relies completely on coal imports, about half from the U.S. Soon, all of Germany's coal-fired power plants will be dependent on imports, with the country scheduled to halt all coal mining in 2018 when government subsidies end. Coal mining's demise in Germany comes as the country is experiencing a resurgence in coal-fired power, one which the U.S. increasingly has helped supply. (AP Photo/Trianel, Guenther Goldstein)

(AP)—One of Germany's newest coal-fired power plants rises here from

the banks of a 100-year-old canal that once shipped coal mined from the Ruhr Valley to the world.

Now the [coal](#) comes the other way.

The 750-megawatt Trianel Kohlekraftwerk Luenen GmbH & Co. power plant relies completely on coal imports, about half from the U.S. Soon, all of Germany's coal-fired power plants will be dependent on imports, with the country expected to halt coal mining in 2018 when government subsidies end.

Coal mining's demise in Germany comes as the country is experiencing a resurgence in coal-fired power, one which the U.S. increasingly has helped supply. U.S. exports of power plant-grade coal to Germany have more than doubled since 2008. In 2013, Germany ranked fifth, behind the United Kingdom, Netherlands, South Korea and Italy in imports of U.S. steam coal, the type burned in power plants.

On the American side of the pollution ledger, this fossil fuel trade helps the United States look as if it is making more progress on global warming than it actually is. That's because it shifts some pollution—and the burden for cleaning it—onto another other country's balance sheet.

Last year, Germany's carbon dioxide emissions grew by 1.2 percent, in large part because the country burned more coal. German environmental officials say the recent boom in coal-fired power is making it harder for the country to meet its climate-protection goals, even as it has increased renewable energy and participates in a carbon market that has lowered emissions throughout Europe.

Activists put some of the blame on the U.S. and President Barack Obama.



This image provided by Trianel on July 24, 2013 shows a crane unloading coal at the Trianel power plant in Luenen, western Germany. The 750-megawatt Trianel power plant relies completely on coal imports, about half from the U.S. Soon, all of Germany's coal-fired power plants will be dependent on imports, with the country scheduled to halt all coal mining in 2018 when government subsidies end. Coal mining's demise in Germany comes as the country is experiencing a resurgence in coal-fired power, one which the U.S. increasingly has helped supply. (AP Photo/Trianel, Guenther Goldstein)

"This is a classic case of political greenwashing," said Dirk Jansen, a spokesman for BUND, a German environmental group. "Obama pretties up his own climate balance, but it doesn't help the global climate at all if Obama's carbon dioxide is coming out of chimneys in Germany."

It's a global shell game that threatens to undermine Obama's strategy of reducing the gases blamed for global warming and reveals a little-

discussed side effect of countries acting alone on a global problem. In the global accounting system set up to track carbon dioxide emissions, only fossil fuel consumed inside a nation's borders is counted when calculating that country's greenhouse gas emissions.

The contribution of this exported pollution to global warming is not something the U.S. administration wants to measure, or even talk about.

White House officials say U.S. coal has a negligible global footprint and reducing coal's use worldwide is the best way to ease [global warming](#). In 2012, U.S. coal exports comprised 9 percent of the global export market, the most recent data available.

"There may be a very marginal increase in coal exports caused by our climate policies," said Rick Duke, Obama's deputy climate adviser, in an interview with The Associated Press. "Given that coal supply is widely available from many sources, our time is better spent working on leading toward a global commitment to cut carbon pollution on the demand side."

Last year, global coal use grew by 3 percent, faster than any other fossil fuel, according to the 2014 BP Statistical Review of World Energy. Some of that growth occurred in the U.S., where higher natural gas prices and a colder-than-average winter caused power plants to burn slightly more coal.

The explanation for Germany's increase is simple: Coal is cheaper than alternatives, particularly natural gas. So, too, are the prices on the carbon market in Europe. Companies can afford to buy the right to release more pollution. And the country burned more coal in 2013 to meet rising demand for electricity in other countries in Europe. Preliminary figures for 2014 indicate coal use could be down. And Germany's carbon dioxide emissions from electricity generation are down from their peak

in 2007.

Still, Germany has built five new coal plants since 2008, adding 4,286 megawatts of new generation, according to Bundesnetzagentur, the grid supervisor. The country plans to add an additional 6,661 megawatts in coal-fired plants from 2014 through 2018, while retiring older coal plants that produced 3,779 megawatts.

The new plants in Germany are cleaner and more efficient than the older plants they are replacing, but they are also bigger. At the same time, Germany began phasing out nuclear power after the 2011 Fukushima accident in Japan.

In the U.S., the opposite is happening. Until recently, coal was more costly than natural gas, which is booming. Environmental regulations are further pushing the oldest and dirtiest coal-fired plants to retirement by adding more costs, and any new coal-fired [power plants](#) will have to capture [carbon dioxide](#) and bury it underground if the Obama administration gets its way. Few if any new coal plants are expected to be built.

But the U.S. and other countries have no problem supplying Germany and the world with coal. Last year, U.S. coal exports totaled \$11 billion in revenue.

"It's not taking responsibility," said Thomas Power, a research professor at the University of Montana in the U.S. who has worked for environmental groups and clean energy foundations and has pushed for a more honest accounting of emissions. "It's shifting the responsibility to someone else."

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