

Australia approves major new fossil fuel projects

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The coal seam gas development has generated widespread local opposition

Australia has approved two major new fossil fuel projects that proponents in the climate change-vulnerable nation say will create badly needed jobs despite growing concerns over emissions.

Authorities in New South Wales state on Wednesday announced conditional approval for a Aus\$3.6 billion (US\$2.6 billion) coal seam gas development that has generated widespread local opposition.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian said she was "relieved" that an independent commission had given energy firm Santos the [green light](#) to proceed, adding that gas was a "central part of our energy security into the future".

The project is a keystone of conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison's plan for a "gas-fired recovery" of the coronavirus-hit economy, as Australia grapples with its first recession in almost 30 years and a million job losses.

Up to 850 wells would be drilled on 1,000 hectares of a 95,000-hectare site, Santos said, with the potential to supply half the gas needs for the country's most populous state.

Conservationists have raised fears over the impact on vast tracts of forest and farmland near Narrabri, northwest of Sydney, as well as Morrison's doubling down on carbon-emitting fuels.

"With this approval, we risk becoming a fossil fuel pariah as the world transitions to renewable energies and countries strengthen their commitment to [climate action](#)," Greens parliamentarian Cate Faehrmann said.

Approval of the gas project came a day after Queensland's government gave a final go ahead for the state's third-largest coal mine, which officials say is expected to have an 80-year lifespan and employ 1,000 workers once operational.

The sprawling [project](#), which will provide steel-producing metallurgical

coal, has proved less contentious due to lower expected emissions than nearby thermal coal operations, but is nevertheless set to raze a swathe of koala habitat.

"Clearing those forests pushes this species closer to extinction," Australian Conservation Foundation's Gavan McFadzean told public broadcaster ABC.

Resource-rich Australia has recently emerged as one of the world's largest exporters of fossil fuels, behind only Russia and Saudi Arabia by some estimates.

The new projects come despite calls for the coronavirus crisis to spur a "green recovery" and just months after Australia emerged from the most severe bushfire season in recorded history.

Almost 90 percent of Australians believe that [climate change](#) is a critical or important threat, according to a recent poll by Sydney's Lowy Institute.

Drought and water shortages—worsened by climate change—are seen as the top threat facing the country, above even the pandemic and the global economic crisis.

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