

Three large natural gas plants would wipe out climate gains from recent shutdowns of coal-fired plants in Illinois

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Shunning climate-changing fossil fuels is turning out to be more difficult than promised in Illinois.

Two weeks after Gov. J.B. Pritzker signed a law billed as the nation's most aggressive mandate for [clean energy](#), the Chicago Democrat's administration tentatively approved a major new source of heat-trapping pollution.

A draft state permit for a new natural gas power plant, planned for a small town south of Springfield, would allow the proposed Lincoln Land Energy Center to emit more [carbon dioxide](#) than 800,000 automobiles every year.

Combined with CO₂ emitted by two other gas [plants](#) approved during Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner's single term in office, the downstate generator would wipe out climate benefits from closing four of the state's coal-fired power plants last year.

During 2019, the now-shuttered [coal plants](#) emitted 7.8 million tons of carbon dioxide, federal records show.

State permits for soon-to-be-operating gas plants near Elwood and Morris and the draft permit for Lincoln Land enable the new gas-burners to release 63% more CO₂ into the atmosphere—up to 12.7 million tons annually.

"That certainly appears to be inconsistent with the path Illinois has chosen to move toward carbon-free energy," said James Gignac, senior Midwest energy analyst for the nonprofit Union of Concerned Scientists.

Unlike power plants built during the last century by state-regulated utilities, companies behind the three new gas plants aren't required to demonstrate their projects are necessary to meet demand for electricity.

Instead, private investors financing the projects are betting natural gas prices will remain low enough for them to profit as dirtier, less-efficient

coal and gas plants are retired. Another way the companies can make money is through annual capacity auctions held by the regional grid operator to guarantee enough electricity is available during hot days and other times when the grid is challenged.

One of Pritzker's top aides deferred to career state employees when asked why a governor who promotes himself as a clean energy champion would allow a big new source of climate pollution to be built under his watch.

"IEPA (the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency), not the governor, is authorized to act on permit applications such as this," Jordan Abudayyeh, Pritzker's chief spokeswoman, said about the proposed Lincoln Land gas plant. "In doing so, the IEPA must follow applicable statutory and regulatory provisions governing that process."

At least one other state is considering the impact of climate change now rather than years in the future. In October, the same month Illinois signaled it would approve the Lincoln Land project, New York denied a permit for a new gas-fired unit at an existing power plant, declaring it "would be inconsistent with or interfere with" a state law demanding carbon-free electricity by 2040.

Environmental groups are citing the New York decision in comments urging Illinois to withdraw the Lincoln Land permit. But it appears they are outgunned.

Backed by unions for construction workers, gas-plant developers had enough clout in Springfield during the summer to block Pritzker's clean energy initiatives until the governor and his legislative allies stripped out provisions that would have required the facilities to steadily reduce carbon emissions during years leading up to 2045, when they would either need to find a way to eliminate heat-trapping pollution altogether

or shut down.

In the final version of the Clean Energy Jobs Act, the new gas plants can operate without climate-focused restrictions until the 2045 deadline for carbon-free electricity in Illinois. The law also extends a lifeline to a pair of municipally owned coal plants, including the Prairie State Generating Station southeast of St. Louis, which last year was the nation's seventh-largest industrial source of carbon dioxide.

J.C. Kibbey is a clean energy advocate at the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council who was involved in negotiations that brokered the deal. He lamented having to compromise to protect a handful of fossil fuel interests for a quarter century, but suggested a dramatic increase in wind and solar power demanded by the Illinois law, along with advances in industrial-scale battery storage, will end up erasing competitive advantages enjoyed by new gas plants.

"Renewables with storage are far more economical than any fossil fuel," Kibbey said. "While we're scaling that up and bringing prices down, gas will probably fill gaps when the sun isn't shining or wind isn't blowing. What I fear is these developers are pursuing a world where their gas plants run 24/7, and we just can't allow that if we want to avoid catastrophic climate change."

In interviews and public comments, companies building or seeking to build gas plants in Illinois contend their projects will help ease the transition from [fossil fuels](#) to renewable energy.

Some are investing in both. Competitive Power Ventures, a Maryland-based company building the 1,250 megawatt Three Rivers gas plant near Morris, also is developing a 350 megawatt solar array in Livingston County.

"We build based on what we think the system is going to need and because of that people will pay for it," said Tom Rumsey, the company's senior vice president for external and regulatory affairs.

Rumsey ticked off one of the gas lobby's latest talking points: Deadly power outages during a Texas cold snap last winter showed the nation can't rely on just wind and solar power.

"If you get too far over your skis on renewables and don't pay attention to what you need to manage the system you run into reliability issues," he said.

The main problem in Texas, though, was an electrical grid dominated by gas-fired power that hadn't been weatherized, and according to the state's largest generator, still isn't.

Reliability hasn't been an issue in Illinois as climate-changing pollution from the state's industries declined by 30% during the past decade, in part because several coal-fired power plants closed.

Another variable involves the state's fleet of six nuclear [power plants](#). Planning for the large gas-fired generators began when it appeared Chicago-based Exelon might close some of its nukes, which generally operate around the clock. Since then state lawmakers have approved two rounds of subsidies for Exelon, including \$700 million during the next five years provided in the new clean energy law.

From a health and climate perspective, continuing to operate the carbon-free plants should help block additional gas-fired generation and stabilize the grid as more wind and solar power comes online.

Some analysts think gas plants intended to operate near full capacity will soon become obsolete if the cost of renewable energy and storage

continues to fall at its current pace. That could limit Three Rivers and the other Illinois projects to being used only when demand peaks.

A new study by Stanford researchers found that a 100% renewable energy grid is feasible by 2050. Moving to wind, water and solar [energy](#), the researchers concluded, would save money, create jobs and cut pollution.

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