

EU decision on natural gas could threaten climate progress

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Operators work at Enagas regasification plant, the largest LNG plant in Europe, in Barcelona, Spain, March 29, 2022. The European Union's decision to include natural gas in a list of activities considered sustainable could derail progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Credit: AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti, File

The European Union's plan to include natural gas in a list of activities

considered sustainable could derail its progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions at a time when climate scientists are calling for dramatic reductions to planet-warming releases.

The plan, approved Wednesday by European lawmakers, will allow investment in natural gas infrastructure such as natural gas power plants and liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals to be considered green investments under certain conditions. Natural gas is a fossil fuel that causes warming of the Earth when it is burned and even more warming when it leaks out unburned.

It comes at a time when the continent is struggling to maintain a reliable gas supply and consumers are suffering from painfully high energy prices. Russia, which supplied about 40% of the EU's gas before it invaded Ukraine, has reduced the flow of gas to Europe and could make even more draconian cuts, and nations throughout Europe have been scrambling for alternatives to Russian energy.

"This...makes sense only as a death knell for coal," said Rob Jackson, professor of earth system science at Stanford University. "Otherwise, it's baffling. We're approaching 8 billion tons of carbon dioxide pollution a year from gas use alone, and that can't continue."

The European Union has a binding commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 and to reach climate neutrality by 2050. And while Europe is working on transitioning to renewable sources such as wind and solar, it doesn't have enough power lines in place to carry electricity from sunny solar farms and wind-fired turbines.

Natural gas has been promoted as a "bridge fuel" because in a side-by-side comparison of power plants, natural gas produces less carbon dioxide when burned than coal. But that's not the way climate experts see it.

"We no longer have the luxury of using gas as a clean fuel," Jackson said. "It's cleaner than coal, but dirtier than most everything else we use today."



Steam leaves a cooling tower of the Lichterfelde gas-fired power plant in Berlin, Germany, March 30, 2022. The European Union's decision to include natural gas in a list of activities considered sustainable could derail progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions at a time when climate scientists are calling for dramatic reductions to planet-warming releases. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Sohn, File

Meanwhile, European politicians are doing what they can to ensure people can keep the lights on and continue to pay energy bills without

going broke.

The decision was welcomed by BDI, Germany's industrial lobby group, which called for more investments in gas infrastructure including LNG import terminals.

To get more natural gas, Europe is looking to boost imports of LNG from countries such as the U.S., which has ramped up its exports to the continent but can't produce more LNG without significant, costly expansion of its LNG terminals. And the process of making LNG is energy-intensive: Emissions of carbon dioxide equivalent from the LNG export terminals on the U.S. Gulf Coast were on par with the country of Costa Rica in 2020, according to the Global Carbon Project.

In addition to those emissions, there are massive leaks of methane, a gas with far more damaging climate-warming potential than carbon dioxide, along the natural gas supply chain. For example, in New Mexico's Permian Basin, the methane leaking into the atmosphere was equivalent to 9% of the gas production for the region, [according to a recent study](#).

"This is an extreme bald-face attempt to greenwash," said John Sterman, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan Sustainability Initiative.

As part of the plan, gas-fired power plants would have to switch to lower-carbon fuels by 2035. But "the language that says it will only be considered green if it can convert to hydrogen or a renewable source of combustible gas by 2035 doesn't excuse it," Sterman said. "That's 13 years from now. And in the meantime, such plants would be producing significant greenhouse gases, and worsening climate change."

Building new infrastructure for natural gas could increase the severity of climate change long term, since infrastructure is built to last 30 or 40

years, which means the possibility of burning fossil fuels well beyond the point that climate experts recommend.



Wind turbines stand at a wind park in Marsberg, Germany, June 15, 2022. The European Union's decision to include natural gas in a list of activities considered sustainable could derail progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions at a time when climate scientists are calling for dramatic reductions to planet-warming releases. While Europe is working on transitioning to renewable sources such as wind and solar, it doesn't have enough power lines in place to carry electricity from sunny solar farms and wind-fired turbines. Credit: AP Photo/Martin Meissner, File

Nor does building such infrastructure happen overnight. It takes about four years to build a new LNG terminal, so the approach does not address the needs of Europeans who need to heat homes this coming

winter.

Even so, burning natural gas is preferable to burning alternatives such as coal, petroleum or tires, all of which is done in Europe, said Julio Friedmann, fellow at the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University.

"Europe is going through a very difficult moment and going through an energy transition at the same time," Friedmann said. "For now, natural gas is cleaner than many options."

There are also quicker solutions than building new land-based LNG facilities on the continent.

For example, Germany is planning to bring in several floating LNG terminals. That would help the nation have access to more natural gas, without creating a permanent investment.

"They need the supplies but they want to avoid lock-in," Friedmann said. "That's reasonable."

There are also efforts to get more pipeline gas from neighbors. The European Union has been pleading with Norway, which delivers 20 to 25% of Europe's gas, as well as Qatar and Algeria, to provide more natural gas.



A small vehicle drives past a network of piping that makes up pieces of a "train" at Cameron LNG export facility in Hackberry, La., March 31, 2022. The European Union's decision to include natural gas in a list of activities considered sustainable could derail progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. To get more natural gas, Europe is looking to boost imports of LNG from countries such as the U.S., which has ramped up its exports to the continent but can't produce more LNG without significant, costly expansion of its LNG terminals. Credit: AP Photo/Martha Irvine, File

The need for natural gas extends beyond providing electricity and heating homes. It's also essential as a feedstock for fertilizer and in producing steel and concrete, Friedmann said. Those are needs that renewable energy can't fulfill today.

"There are strong limits today on European transmission capabilities," Friedmann said. "There are strong limits today on the area in which renewables can be built on land."

There are also many things that can be done to lower the climate impact, such as installing carbon capture and storage technology on new natural gas infrastructure, Friedmann said.

But money would be better spent working to replace home natural gas systems with heat pumps or investing in making homes more energy-efficient to dramatically reduce demand, Sterman said.

"Nobody wants tons of coal or cubic meters of natural gas," Sterman said. "What people want and need is to be warm in the winter, cool in the summer, and the lights on when they flip the switch...Efficiency is the fastest, safest and cheapest way to provide those wants and needs, with very little in the way of unintended harmful cons, if any."

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