

Australia rejects clean energy target for cheaper power

17 October 2017, by Rod Mcguirk

The Australian government on Tuesday rejected a plan to generate 42 percent of the country's power from wind and solar energy, in a setback for compliance with climate change commitments

Conservation groups have condemned the ruling conservative coalition for abandoning the renewable energy target for 2030 that was recommended this year by Australia's chief scientist to comply with the Paris climate change agreement.

The government instead plans to require power companies to provide a certain minimum amount of power from coal, gas and hydroelectric generation. Reliance on solar and wind generation would be limited according to the needs of each state for guarantee of supply.

The policy change will end subsidies paid to wind and solar generators from 2020, to help reduce costs for consumers.

"Past energy plans have subsidized some industries, punished others and slugged consumers," Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said in a statement.

"The Turnbull government will take a different approach," he added.

Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg told Parliament that coal and gas would generate 64 to 72 percent of Australia's electricity by 2030.

Coal and gas will account for 76.5 percent by 2020, meaning Australia was on track to achieve its current clean energy target of 23.5 percent of electricity from renewable sources such as wind, solar and hydro by then, Frydenberg said.

Hydro is reliable, clean and renewable but is a fairly small component of the energy mix.

Australians per capita are among the world's worst greenhouse gas polluters because of the country's heavy reliance on its abundant coal reserves for power. But no new coal-fired generators are being built because of uncertainty over how Australia intends to achieve its greenhouse gas cuts.

Australia was about to overtake Qatar as the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas but the government has restricted exports because state governments have created a domestic supply shortage by blocking new gas field development.

Mark Wakeham, chief executive of Environment Victoria, a Victoria state-based conservation group, accused the government of rejecting "a clean energy target in favor of a coal energy target."

"Australia joins Donald Trump's United States as one of only two major national governments to remove support for investment in renewable energy and redirect it to aging and polluting power stations," Wakeham said in a statement.

The government has accused center-left Labor Party-controlled states of irresponsibly switching to clean electricity sources at the cost of ensuring reliable supply.

The government blames a heavy reliance on wind and solar energy for a statewide blackout in South Australia during a storm in 2016. The state's power operator, however, said the outage was unavoidable due to the storm's ferocity.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a business advocacy group, welcomed the government's plan, saying it would cut costs for power, ensure reliability and meet Australia's carbon emission reduction targets while maintaining international competitiveness.

Australia's Paris target is to reduce emissions by 26 percent below 2005 levels by 2030.

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