

China's energy future

Written by Rodger A Payne

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Anyone who follows climate change politics knows that China's coal consumption is a huge concern. As this chart from the U.S. Department of Energy reveals, Chinese production has doubled in the last decade (click to see full-size image).

In addition to the implications for global warming, that increased production is associated with all sorts of other negative externalities. For example, Chinese coal mining is an incredibly dangerous occupation:

5,000 of China's 5 million coal miners are killed on the job each year, a death rate of one in 1,000 on average. By comparison, an average of nine of the 83,000 miners in the U.S. die each year, a death rate of one in 10,000.

Jasper Becker, an award-winning journalist and consultant who has covered China for many years, says that even this estimate is wildly off-the-mark:

Chinese coal is cheap to buy but the human cost is high. Officially, China has three million coal miners who mostly

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work in 580 big state mines. But in reality, China probably has 6.6 million miners. The rest work in 70,000 mines run by villages and local governments where equipment and working conditions are extremely primitive. Most are local peasants who earn low wages and whose lives are worth little. As a result, about six thousand die every year, a death rate that is 100 times the rate in America or Australia. China, which produces a third of the world's coal, therefore accounts for 80 percent of the mining industry's fatalities. In addition, some 600,000 miners suffer from pneumoconiosis, a number grows by 70,000 a year. Some estimate that perhaps the real death toll from mining, if the deaths from lung diseases are included, is around 20,000 lives a year.

The conventional wisdom suggests that China needs this coal to maintain its remarkable economic growth rates (9.5% annual average for 26 years). And, of course, the Chinese government is said to need this truly impressive economic growth to maintain its political legitimacy and power.

Interestingly, however, China's government is actually making significant investments in green alternative energy technologies — and at a rate much greater than the U.S.

A new Pew study estimates that \$162 billion was invested globally in renewable energy and biofuels last year, up 230 percent from 2005, despite the weak economy. Given their financial heft, the G-20 countries dominated clean energy investments. And who was number 1? China, with \$34.6 billion invested. The U.S. was second, at only \$18.6 billion. If you count the European Union's 27 countries as one bloc, the EU was tops at \$41.1 billion, making the U.S. a distant third.

Eventually, China's investments in green energy might make a major dent in its substantial coal expansion plans.

From the U.S. point of view, this news about China could surely be used more frequently in domestic debates to spur far more green energy research — and purchasing. The U.S. spent much of the past 15 years arguing that it would not agree to act to reduce greenhouse gas emissions because nations like China and India would make those reductions moot — and the policies would create an unfair economic burden on U.S. businesses.

It looks like China is now determined to blast by the U.S. on green energy and make Washington's past decisions seem very short-sighted. Unfortunately, the present and immediate future appears to look like the past — with slightly different political calculations at work. The climate change legislation is officially dead in the current Congress, which means activists are focused on a waterer-down replacement "clean energy" bill. It is not certain to pass this year given the looming November elections.

In a future post, I'll revisit the notion that autocratic states like China might have an advantage in environmental decision-making.

About the author:

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