

U.S. carbon emissions rose 2% in 2013 after years of decline



U.S. carbon emissions from the energy sector rose about 2% in 2013 after years of decline because of a small increase in the use of coal to generate electricity, the U.S. Energy Information Administration says. Above, a file photo of a coal-fired power plant in Holcomb, Kan. (Charlie Riedel / Associated Press /February 2, 2007)

By Tony Barboza

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Carbon dioxide emissions from the nation's energy sector rose about 2% in 2013 after declining for several years, federal energy officials reported Monday.

The reversal came because power plants last year burned more coal to generate electricity, after years in which natural gas accounted for an increasing share of the nation's electricity, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the analytical branch of the Department of Energy.

Though the 2013 figures are not final, once all the data are in, analysts expect a roughly 2% increase in carbon emissions over 2012 because of a small rise in coal consumption, the agency said in [a report](#) posted online on Monday.

Power plants are the biggest source of greenhouse gases that are building up in the atmosphere and causing climate change.

Carbon dioxide emissions from domestic power generation peaked in 2007 and have declined four out of the six years since, the agency said. The downward trend is tied in part to sagging energy demand in the wake of the recent recession, but is also being propelled by improvements in energy efficiency, shifts in energy prices and the displacement of coal power by natural gas and renewables.

The energy administration, in [a report last year](#), warned of the 2013 increase in carbon emissions. That report found coal use on the upswing because of a drop in coal prices and a rise in natural gas prices. Power plants that burn natural gas produce about half as much heat-trapping carbon dioxide as coal-fired plants.

“Even though emissions are up, they're probably not up as much as they would have been if we hadn't put in a number of state and federal policies on energy efficiency, renewable energy and other low-emitting sources,” said Thomas Peterson, who heads the Center for Climate Strategies, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. “The shifts that are driven by the economy or by natural gas are now moderated quite a bit.”

Emissions last year were still about 10% below 2005 levels, putting the nation on its way toward the Obama administration's goal of reducing carbon emissions by 17% of 2005 levels by 2020, the energy administration says.

The carbon emissions uptick will probably add a sense of urgency to the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's push to reduce greenhouse gases](#) that are driving climate change by curbing carbon emissions from the nation's power plants.

Stacey Davis, senior program manager at the Center for Clean Air Policy, a Washington-based think tank, called the recent rise in coal production a "short term blip on the screen."

"It shows that there's a small increase in the cost of natural gas generation," she said, "but that's just one of many options that are available for sources to comply with the EPA's forthcoming standards on existing power plants."

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