



Fukushima's legacy: Joban Joint Power company's Nakoso coal-fired power station at Iwaki City. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Japan to build 22 coal power plants

Hiroko Tabuchi

Tokyo | Just beyond the windows of Satsuki Kanno's apartment overlooking Tokyo Bay, a behemoth from a bygone era will soon rise: a coal-burning power plant, part of a buildup of coal power that is unheard-of for an advanced economy.

It is one unintended consequence of the Fukushima nuclear disaster almost a decade ago, which forced Japan to all but close its nuclear power program. Japan now plans to build as many as 22 new coal-burning power plants — one of the dirtiest sources of electricity — at 17 different sites in the next five years, just when the world needs to slash carbon dioxide emissions to fight global warming.

Climate change aside, the new power plants may bode well for Australia, which is the world's No.1 exporter of coal. Australia exported coal worth \$US47 billion (\$70.5 billion) in 2018.

"Why coal? Why now?" said Kanno, a homemaker in Yokosuka, the site for two of the coal-burning units that will be built just several hundred feet from her home. "It's the worst possible thing they could build."

Together the 22 power plants would emit almost as much carbon dioxide annually as all the passenger cars sold each year in the US. The construction stands in contrast with Japan's effort to portray this summer's Olympic Games in Tokyo as one of the greenest ever.

The Yokosuka project has prompted unusual pushback in Japan, where environmental groups more typically focus on nuclear power. Some local residents are suing the government over its approval of the new coal-burning plant in what supporters hope will jump-start opposition to coal in Japan.

The Japanese government, the plaintiffs say, rubber-stamped the project without a proper environmental assessment. The complaint is noteworthy because it argues that the plant will not only degrade local air quality, but will also endanger communities by contributing to climate change.

The era of coal is ending, but for Japan, it's proving very difficult

Yukari Takamura, University of Tokyo

Coal burning is one of the biggest single sources of carbon dioxide emissions, which drive global warming.

Japan is already experiencing severe effects from climate change. Scientists have said a heat wave in 2018 that killed more than 1000 people could not have happened without climate change. Because of heat concerns, the International Olympic Committee had to move the Tokyo Olympics' marathon events to a cooler city 1200 kilometres north.

Japan's policy sets it apart from other developed economies. Britain is set to phase out coal power by 2025. France has said it will shut down its coal power plants by 2022. In the US, utilities are rapidly retiring coal power plants and no new ones are planned.

But Japan relies on coal for more than a third of its power. And while older coal plants will start retiring, eventually reducing overall coal dependency, the country still expects to meet more than a quarter of its electricity needs from coal in 2030.

"Japan is an anomaly among developed economies," said Yukari Takamura, an expert in climate policy at the University of Tokyo. "The era of coal is ending, but for Japan, it's proving very difficult to give up an energy source that it has relied on for so long."

Japan's appetite for coal isn't due solely to Fukushima. Coal consumption has been rising for decades, as the energy-poor country, which imports most of its energy sources, raced to wean itself from foreign oil following the oil shocks of the 1970s.

Fukushima, though, presented another type of energy crisis, and more reason to keep investing in coal. And even as the economics of coal have started to crumble — research has shown that by 2025 renewable energy could be cheaper — the government still believes Japan's utilities must maintain a diversity of energy sources.

THE NEW YORK TIMES