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World's Power Plant Emissions Detailed

U.S. Appears to Be Worst Carbon Dioxide Polluter, but China Is Catching Up Fast

By Juliet Eilperin, 11/15/07

[China](#), [South Africa](#) and [India](#) host the world's five dirtiest utility companies in terms of global warming pollution, according to the first-ever worldwide database of power plants' carbon dioxide emissions, while a single [Southern Co.](#) plant in Juliette, Ga., emits more annually than [Brazil](#)'s entire power sector.

The analysis, released yesterday by the Washington-based think tank Center for Global Development, a nonprofit that focuses on how the actions of rich countries affect developing nations, provides a detailed inventory of power plants' greenhouse gas emissions by countries and regions within countries. The database shows the United States as the world's biggest carbon dioxide (CO₂) emitter and how quickly it will be outpaced by rapidly-industrializing nations.

While the United States still produces the most carbon dioxide from electricity generation, releasing 2.8 billion tons of CO₂ each year, China is close to overtaking it, with its 2.7 billion tons. Moreover, China plans to build or expand 199 coal-fired facilities in the next decade, compared with the United States' 83.

Power plants account for 40 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions and 25 percent of the world's.

Frank O'Donnell, who heads the advocacy group Clean Air Watch, called the new analysis "pretty shocking." "If we're serious about dealing with global warming, we are going to have to get a handle on coal-burning electric power in this country," he said.

[Duke Energy](#) chief executive James E. Rogers -- whose company is the third-largest CO₂-emitting utility in the country and 12th in the world -- agreed with that assessment.

"I have a special responsibility to work on this issue, because my company's carbon footprint is so big," he said. But Rogers added that the fact that certain areas are more dependent on coal than others means he would oppose any effort to auction off carbon allowances, as envisioned in a new bill written by [Sens. Joseph I. Lieberman](#) (I-Conn.) and [John W. Warner](#) (R-Va.).

That approach could raise rates for Duke's [Indiana](#) customers by 35 percent by 2012, Rogers said, and would amount to a tax.

"The whole point of cap-and-trade is to put a price on carbon so we can make good economic decisions in the future," he said. "It's not about punishing people for making decisions 40 years ago."

Upgrading or replacing aging plants is key, O'Donnell said, because 72 percent of the nation's 500 coal-fired plants were built in the 1970s.

Southern Co. spokesman Mike Tyndall said his firm's emissions are high "simply because of the size of the plants" and because "we're serving an ever-larger population." Though the company opposes a mandatory cap on emissions, Tyndall said: "We're at the forefront of developing new technology to address CO2 emissions."

The [Ohio River](#) Valley, the Southeast and [Texas](#) are the dirtiest U.S. areas, in terms of greenhouse gas-emitting power plants.

The Center for Global Development study contains surprises: South Africa's government-owned [Eskom](#) ranks as the world's second most polluting utility, with 214 million tons of carbon dioxide released this year, and Australians emit more CO2 per capita than any other nation. [Germany](#), whose leader, Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#) has pushed aggressively for deeper cuts in greenhouse gas emissions among developed countries, ranks as [Europe's](#) biggest emitter of carbon dioxide from power generation.

David Wheeler, a former [World Bank](#) economist and the CGD senior fellow who compiled the database, said his research highlights the extent to which both industrialized and developing nations need to cut their carbon dioxide emissions to avert drastic climate change.

"It's a question of mutual survival," Wheeler said. "Each side is emitting enough to sink everything."