



THE CLIMATE COST OF COAL

HOW COAL-FIRED POWER PLANTS IMPACT OUR PLANET AND OUR HEALTH

Heavily polluting coal-fired power plants have been on the decline in the United States because of cheaper and cleaner alternatives, including renewable energy resources. This is a win for public health.

The last new large coal plant was built in Texas in 2013. Still, as of 2023, over 225 remain, many old, costly, and inefficient. The highest-emitting ones are located in Texas, North Dakota, Alabama, and Missouri. A quarter of these plants spanning 25 states had plans to close by the end of 2029, and there was even a push to get to zero in operation.

But now this push is threatened; the Trump administration has issued orders to reopen a number of plants that were set to be shut down. And the administration is also seeking to allow the Bureau of Land Management to use millions of acres of public lands for new coal mining, among other environmentally destructive practices. If the current administration succeeds in bringing coal back, home energy bills are expected to soar, especially in states that have not prioritized clean energy.

The health impacts of coal-fired plants

Air pollution from coal-fired power plants is linked to a number of health and environmental impacts, including asthma, cancer, heart and lung ailments, neurological problems and brain damage, acid rain, and global warming. When coal is burned, it creates coal ash or coal combustion residuals (CCRs), a mix of pollutants including mercury, lead, soot, arsenic, and various other heavy metals. These pollute the air and contaminate groundwater. Sulfur dioxide and nitrogen emissions from coal-fired power plants create ground-level ozone, which can cause respiratory and cardiovascular problems.

Soot and other pollutants associated with coal-fired power plants disproportionately affect children and other vulnerable populations. They can contribute to asthma attacks, respiratory illness, lung cancer, heart attacks and strokes, metabolic disorders, and nervous system impacts. Shutting plants is a powerful way to address pollution-related health issues; research has shown a drop in asthma rates in areas where coal-fired power plants were closed.

Coal miners are more exposed to coal dust than the general population. Their occupational exposure can result in higher incidences of illnesses like black lung disease and cancer. These diseases can develop over time, and their severity may differ based on exposure levels and other environmental factors.



The Four Corners Generating Station operates on Navajo Nation land in New Mexico, producing coal-fired power for the region.

Outsize climate impact

Climate change is a serious global impact of coal. It's mostly carbon, and when burned, it creates more carbon dioxide (CO₂), a greenhouse gas, than other fossil fuels.

So much so that, as of 2023, 16% of the nation's CO₂ emissions are still coming from coal. Burning 2,000 pounds of coal yields more than 4,000 pounds of planet-heating CO₂.

Coal and communities of color

The majority of the top mercury-emitting coal-fired plants are located within 50 to 100 miles of large population centers. Black, Latino, Indigenous, and economically disadvantaged populations bear a disproportionate burden of environmental harms and adverse health impacts.

An outsize number of Black people in the United States live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant. Communities that typically eat more fish than others are also at higher risk for ingesting mercury. Tribal communities are among the highest risk groups for mercury contamination owing to traditional heavy fish consumption.



Plant Bowen, one of the largest coal-fired power plants in North America, rises behind a residential street in Bartow County, Georgia.

Get involved

Clean air is critical for human health. Pollutants emitted by coal-fired power plants are dangerous for our bodies and our climate—keeping coal plants open when there are cheaper, cleaner alternatives will drive up electricity bills and pollution for families and communities.

You can find out if coal-fired power plants are still in operation in your state—and where. And if you live near a shuttered coal plant, you can also find out if the Trump administration is trying to reopen it. Then you can get involved in the fight for the cleaner, healthier, and more affordable energy options that our families and communities deserve.

Visit www.momscleanairforce.org to learn more.



Mercury 101

Coal-fired power plants are a main source of toxic mercury pollution. While the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, implemented in 2012, have helped slash pollution at coal plants, they continue to emit dangerous quantities. Levels of pollutants are highest in areas closest to the facilities, but mercury and other unsafe pollutants can travel far and wide.

Fish consumption is a major route of exposure to the mercury emitted by coal-fired power plants, as mercury released into the air falls into bodies of water, converts into highly toxic methylmercury, and ultimately gets into the food chain.

Children exposed to mercury during a mother's pregnancy can experience persistent and lifelong learning, behavioral, and motor function problems. This is why pregnant people are routinely advised to avoid certain fish likely to contain the highest levels of mercury.

Most of the United States has mercury fish consumption advisories in effect as ingesting even small amounts can cause serious health problems—and not just for developing babies.

For sources, please visit:
momscleanairforce.org/sources-climate-cost-coal

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The mission of Moms Clean Air Force is to protect children from air pollution and climate change. We envision a safe, stable, and equitable future where all children breathe clean air. We fight for Justice in Every Breath, recognizing the importance of equitable solutions in addressing air pollution and climate change. www.momscleanairforce.org