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China Fears Consumer Impact on Global Warming



Christie Johnston for The New York Times

The Guangzhou Steel mill in Guangzhou, China, will close its doors in September as part of a government effort to improve energy efficiency in factories. [More Photos »](#)

By KEITH BRADSHER
Published: July 4, 2010

Correction Appended

GUANGZHOU, [China](#) — Premier [Wen Jiabao](#) has promised to use an “iron hand” this summer to make his nation more energy efficient. The central government has ordered cities to close inefficient factories by September, like the vast Guangzhou Steel mill here, where most of the 6,000 workers will be laid off or pushed into early retirement.

Multimedia



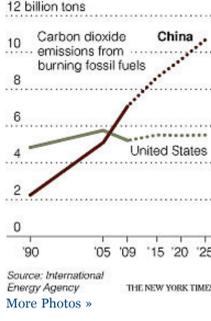
Closing a Historic Steel Mill

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[Closing an Old Polluter May Not Ease Emissions](#) (July 5, 2010)

More Emissions

China's energy-related emissions of greenhouse gases are expected to surge even if a national efficiency campaign succeeds, as assumed below. But Chinese and Western experts increasingly worry that Chinese emissions may rise even faster than shown here.



Source: International Energy Agency

THE NEW YORK TIMES

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[increase in tonnage](#) ever by a single country.

Until recently, projections by both the International Energy Agency and the Energy Information Administration in Washington had assumed that, even without an international energy agreement to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, China would achieve rapid improvements in energy efficiency through 2020.

But now China is struggling to limit emissions even to the “business as usual” levels that climate models assume if the world does little to address global warming.

“We really have an arduous task” even to reach China’s existing energy-efficiency goals, said Gao Shixian, an energy official at the National Development and Reform Commission, in a speech at the Clean Energy Expo China in late June in Beijing.

China’s goal has been to reduce energy consumption per unit of economic output by 20 percent this year compared with 2005, and to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases per unit of economic output by 40 to 45 percent in 2020 compared with 2005.

But even if China can make the promised improvements, the International Energy Agency now projects that China’s emissions of energy-related greenhouse gases will grow more than the rest of the world’s combined increase by 2020. China, with one-fifth of the world’s population, is now on track to represent more than a quarter of humanity’s energy-related greenhouse-gas emissions.

Industry by industry, energy demand in China is increasing so fast that the broader efficiency targets are becoming harder to hit.

¶Although China has passed the United States in the average efficiency of its coal-fired power plants, demand for electricity is so voracious that China last year built new coal-fired plants with a total capacity greater than all existing power plants in New York State.

¶While China has imposed lighting efficiency standards on new buildings and is drafting similar standards for household appliances, construction of apartment and office buildings proceeds at a frenzied pace. And rural sales of refrigerators, washing machines and other large household appliances more than doubled in the past year in response to government subsidies aimed at helping 700 million peasants afford modern amenities.

¶As the economy becomes more reliant on domestic demand instead of exports, growth is shifting toward energy-hungry steel and cement production and away from light industries like toys and apparel.

¶Chinese cars get 40 percent better gas mileage on average than American cars because they tend to be much smaller and have weaker engines. And China is drafting regulations that would require cars within each size category to improve their mileage by 18 percent over the next five years. But China’s auto market soared 48 percent in 2009, surpassing the American market for the first time, and car sales are rising almost as rapidly again this year.

One of the newest factors in China’s energy use has emerged beyond the planning purview of policy makers in Beijing, in the form of labor unrest at factories across the country.

An older generation of low-wage migrant workers accepted hot dormitories and factories with barely a fan to keep them cool, one of many reasons Chinese emissions per person are still a third of American emissions per person. Besides higher pay, young Chinese are now demanding their own 100-square-foot studio apartments, with air-conditioning at home and in factories. Indeed, one of the demands by workers who went on strike in May at a [Honda](#) transmission factory in Foshan was that the air-conditioning thermostats be set lower.

Chinese regulations still mandate that the air-conditioning in most places be set no cooler than 79 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. But upscale shopping malls have long been exempt from the thermostat controls and have maintained much cooler temperatures through the summers. Now, as the consumer economy takes root, those malls are proliferating in cities across China.

Premier Wen acknowledged [in a statement](#) after a cabinet meeting in May that the efficiency gains had started to reverse and actually deteriorated by 3.2 percent in the first quarter of this year. He cited a lack of controls on energy-intensive industries, although the economic rebound from the global financial crisis may have also played a role.

Global climate discussions, in pinning hopes on China’s ability to vastly improve its efficient use of energy, have tended to cite International Energy Agency data showing that China uses twice as much energy per dollar of output as the United States and three times as much as the [European Union](#). The implicit assumption is that China can greatly improve efficiency because it must still be relying mainly on wasteful, aging boilers and outmoded power plants.

But David Fridley, a longtime specialist in China’s energy at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, said that the comparison to the United States and the European Union was misleading.

Manufacturing makes up three times as much of the Chinese economy as it does the American economy, and it is energy-intensive. If the United States had much more manufacturing, Mr. Fridley said, it would also use considerably more energy per dollar of output.

“China has been trying to grab the low-lying fruit — to find those opportunities where increased efficiency can save money and reduce carbon-dioxide emissions,” said Ken Caldeira, a climate change specialist at the Carnegie Institution for Science in Stanford, Calif. “It is starting to look like it might not be that easy to find and grab this fruit.”

Correction: July 5, 2010

An earlier version of the graphic accompanying this article incorrectly labeled the y axis.

A version of this article appeared in print on July 5, 2010, on page A1 of the New York edition.

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