

Coal bust may be behind stall in carbon emissions

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THE link between economic growth and rising greenhouse gas emissions may have finally been broken. Last week, we learned that carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels [failed to rise in 2014](#) – the first time that has happened without an economic downturn. Now we know why.

Although coal plant construction tripled globally after 2005, that boom is turning to bust. An [analysis by CoalSwarm](#), a think tank supported by the Sierra Club and other US NGOs, has found that since 2010 hundreds of coal plant projects worldwide have been shelved or cancelled – with two abandoned for every one completed.

The amount of coal-fired power generating capacity is still increasing, but the rate of increase is down from a peak of 6.9 per cent to 2.7 per cent in 2013. "We don't have final numbers yet, but it looks like in 2014 growth in wind power capacity exceeded that in coal," says CoalSwarm's director Ted Nace. "The slowdown in CO₂ is largely caused by a slowdown in power being generated by coal."

In 2014, the world's energy industries emitted 32.3 billion tonnes of CO₂, exactly the same as 2013, according to preliminary figures cited by the International Energy Agency. This was despite an expansion of more than 3 per cent in the global economy. "For the first time, greenhouse gas emissions are decoupling from economic growth," said the IEA's chief economist Fatih Birol. Such claims have been made before, [notably after 2012](#), when emissions rose only 1.4 per cent against economic growth of 3.2 per cent. The decoupling faltered in 2013, when emissions rose by 2.5 per cent, close to economic growth of 2.9 per cent.

But last year the gulf between growth and emissions was the biggest yet. "These figures show green growth is achievable," said UK climate change secretary [Ed Davey](#).

China, which consumes half the world's coal, was the biggest mover. Coal has driven its economic surge, but in 2014 coal burning declined by 1.6 per cent, even as its economy grew 7.3 per cent. Its huge fleet of coal plants is now working at only 54 per cent of capacity, a 35-year low, according to Nace. "New renewables capacity exceeded new coal capacity in China in both 2013 and 2014," says Nace. China is rejecting coal both to prevent smog, which kills an estimated 670,000 Chinese people a year, and to curb CO₂ emissions. A cap on Chinese coal burning formed part of the [agreement on climate change](#) signed by the US and China last November.

Some countries are holding out, though. Turkey, Vietnam, Indonesia and Poland are all accumulating coal-fired capacity. "But what's striking is how quickly the business climate has turned against coal since 2012," says Nace. The US and the European Union between them have 22 per cent less coal-fired electricity capacity than a decade ago. Yet, if not closed early, the world's coal power stations will still pump out four-fifths of the CO₂ we can emit and still

stay below 2 degrees of warming. And according to [Myles Allen](#) of the University of Oxford's Environmental Change Institute, CO2 emissions must fall by 2.5 per cent a year from now on to reach that target.