

# Australia shown to have highest greenhouse gas emissions from coal in world on per capita basis

**Analysis released at Cop26 climate summit shows Australia's per capita emissions from coal power nearly double those of China**



An analysis released by British climate and energy thinktank Ember at the Cop26 summit in Glasgow shows Australia has the highest greenhouse gas emissions from coal power in the world on a per capita basis. Photograph: Saeed Khan/AFP/Getty Images

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Australia has the highest greenhouse gas emissions from coal power in the world on a per capita basis, nearly doubling those in China, according to a new analysis released at the **Cop26** climate summit in Glasgow.

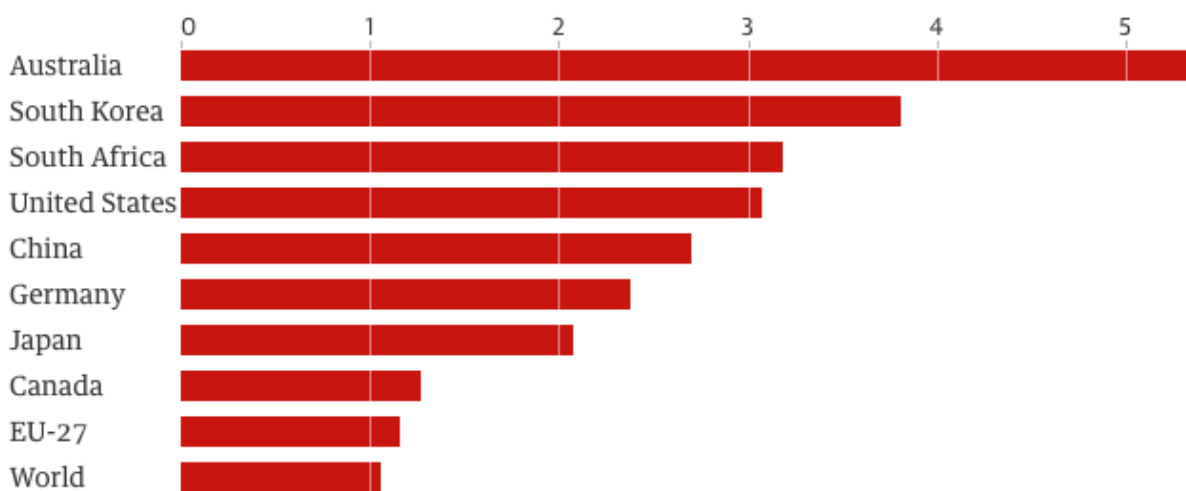
As the talks headed towards a **fraught final day**, there was disagreement over whether a **closing declaration** would commit countries to return with stronger short-term emissions reduction targets next year, and explicitly support an accelerated phaseout of coal.

The British climate and energy thinktank Ember released an analysis that suggested the world's wealthiest countries remained among the worst emitters from coal power once population was factored in.

Australia topped the list, with annual per person emissions five times greater than the global average and 40% higher than any other major coal power user. Examining the period since the landmark Paris agreement was signed in 2015, the analysis found Australia emitted 5.34 tonnes of carbon dioxide per person each year, placing it ahead of South Korea (3.81), South Africa (3.19), the US (3.08) and the world's biggest outright emitter, China (2.71).

### Coal power emissions per capita, G20 nations above world average

Annual average 2015-2020 in tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>



Guardian graphic | Source: Ember

Ember cited the International Energy Agency to argue OECD countries including Australia should end coal power by 2030 if they were to play their part in attempting to keep global heating to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels – a goal of the **Paris agreement** – within reach.

The Morrison government has rejected this and did not join a group of countries that pledged to phase out burning coal for electricity.

Dave Jones, Ember's global program lead, said Cop26 had seen a divergence between developing Asian countries and major OECD coal users over the need

to close coal generation. Vietnam had pledged to stop building coal plants and to stop using it in the 2040s, and Indonesia, the Philippines and India had shown signs they were changing previously held positions.

He said by comparison arguments put forward by Australia, Japan and South Korea were “embarrassing” and “simply untenable”.

“They will undoubtedly be forced to change their position in the coming months,” Jones said.

Ban Ki-moon, a former UN secretary general and deputy chair of The Elders, an international non-governmental organisation of senior statespeople, said the potential of renewable energy was growing exponentially and OECD countries needed to align with the target of phasing out coal entirely by the end of the decade. “This will be a true demonstration of global leadership,” he said.

About 60% of Australia’s electricity over the past year came from burning coal. That proportion is gradually diminishing and the country’s coal fleet is ageing, but under current closure schedules it would continue to use coal power until the late 2040s.

The Morrison government has been heavily criticised in Glasgow for its ongoing support of fossil fuels. Greenpeace International head Jennifer Morgan **grouped it with Saudi Arabia as a “wrecker”** opposed to the action needed to cut emissions and provide the finance needed to help developing countries respond.

Australia was one of only four countries, along with Indonesia, Mexico and Singapore, that chose to just resubmit the same 2030 emissions target at Cop26. Australia’s has committed to only a 26-28% cut compared with 2005 levels, though government projections suggest it could make a cut of up to 35%, in part due to state government policies. Scientists have advised global emissions need to be cut by 45% by the end of the decade.

Mary Robinson, a former president of Ireland and chair of The Elders, said leaders of developing countries were “in crisis mode” at the talks but some leaders who could do the most to address the problem were not. She bracketed Australia with Saudi Arabia, Brazil, China and Russia.

“Australia, a wealthy country, is still in fossil fuel mode, not in crisis mode,” she **told the UK’s Sky News**.

The talks were boosted late on Wednesday by a surprise joint declaration by the two biggest emitters, China and the US, that they would work together to cut emissions in the crucial next decade.

But there was significant disagreement between countries over a draft text released Wednesday morning.

It included a proposal that countries return to the negotiating table next year with new plans to ramp up emission cuts this decade. Under the Paris agreement, countries are expected to return with better pledges in 2025 but - with **a chasm between existing commitments and the deep cuts needed** - many are now demanding the deadline should be brought forward.

The draft text also proposed countries agree to accelerate the phasing out of coal and subsidies for fossil fuels.

Australia has not been represented at a political level at the talks since Angus Taylor, the emissions reduction minister, left a week ago, and it has not made public its position on key parts of draft text released on Wednesday morning. But Scott Morrison has previously strongly opposed suggestions coal power should be actively phased out, and said he has no plans to increase Australia’s 2030 commitment.

In a statement on Thursday, Taylor said Australia was “an active and constructive participant in the negotiations to ensure a positive outcome”.

There is dispute between countries over whether the text will keep a reference to the scientific case for limiting global temperature rises to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels, with some large developing countries reportedly opposed. Poor countries said much more needed to be done to increase finance packages to help them cut emissions and cope with the impacts of climate breakdown.

Scientists at the talks **expressed frustration** that rhetoric from global leaders was not being matched by action, and warned that every extra fraction of a degree of global heating would have dire consequences.

# Australian government refuses to join 40 nations phasing out coal, saying it won't 'wipe out industries'

**Australia accused of going backward as Cop26 pledge backed by five of world's biggest coal power users**

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Australia will not join more than 40 countries in pledging to end coal power by 2030. Photograph: John W Banagan/Getty Images

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The Australian government will not join more than 40 countries committing to phase out coal power, with the energy minister declaring Australia was focused on developing technology not “wiping out industries”.

The pledge at the Cop26 climate summit **to end the use of coal power** – by the 2030s “or as soon as possible thereafter” for the wealthy, and the 2040s by developing nations – was **backed by five of the biggest 20 coal power users**: South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Poland and Ukraine.

A **separate group of countries**, including the US, Canada and the UK, pledged to end overseas investment in coal, oil and gas by the end of next year.

Neither statement was signed by Australia, China, Japan or India, and the phase-out dates for coal power were later than the British hosts of the summit – which had set a goal of “consigning coal to history” – had suggested.

But supporters of the push said the formal commitment regarding coal remained a significant step – one that was unimaginable a few years ago. The Paris agreement, the global climate deal signed in 2015, does not explicitly mention the need to stop using fossil fuels.

They said it built on a previous G20 commitment by all major economies, including China, **to stop public financing for new dirty coal plants overseas** from this year.

Asked whether the deals meant the end of coal was in sight, **Angus Taylor** – Australia’s emissions reduction minister – said the government’s focus was “not on wiping out industries”.

“It’s on bringing down the cost of low-emissions technologies and making sure those low-emissions technologies can deliver for Australians and for our customers throughout the world,” he said in Glasgow.

“We will supply the products our customers need to bring down their emissions over time. This can’t happen overnight, let’s be clear about this. There is a sensible pathway here, Australia will be part of it.”

Richie Merzian, a former Australian climate diplomat who is now the climate and energy program director with the Australia Institute, said the new commitments on coal in Glasgow were “beyond anything we have witnessed before” and would have ramifications for Australia. Twenty-one countries had for the first time committed to phasing out existing and not build new coal power, he said.

“The Australian government is trying to push Australia backward while the world moves forward,” he said. “Indonesia, the world’s largest thermal coal exporter, has signed up to the ... transition to phase out coal and Vietnam, an

Australian coal client, is pulling the handbrake on new initiatives. This is just the start.”

The Morrison government’s 2050 net zero emissions plan has been **criticised for not including new policies** to reduce emissions in the short term as the scientific advice says is necessary, and relying on new technology to become cheap enough to make deep cuts in the 2030s and 40s.

The federal resources minister, Keith Pitt, on Thursday announced 10 new potential areas for offshore oil and gas exploration along the Australian coast had been opened for expressions of interest.

It coincided with **a new report by Climate Analytics** that said the rollout of gas for heating, electricity and cooking was turning it into the “new coal”, and calculated its worldwide use must be slashed by nearly a third this decade to avoid disastrous climate effects.

Gas is often described as having half the emissions of coal when burned, but research has found its impact on the climate **is greater due to methane leakage**.

A separate paper found more than half Australia’s fossil fuel assets **could become worthless by 2036** if the world pursued a net zero transition.

Mathias Cormann, Australia’s former finance minister, used a speech to **Cop26** on Thursday to urge countries to stop subsidising fossil fuels.

In his latest about-face on climate policy since becoming the head of the OECD, Cormann said “more comprehensive policy action on climate” was needed to translate the increased political ambition on show in Glasgow into “real outcomes”. That included removing “distortions” that diverted investment away from the transition to net zero emissions, he said.

“Too many policies still encourage emissions-intensive investment, production and consumption,” he said.

“Inefficient government support or subsidies not only have a negative impact on our collective efforts to achieve net zero emissions, but also on our biodiversity, water and air quality.”



Cormann was a part of the cabinet that last year backed a so-called “gas-fired recovery” from the pandemic, and dedicated funding for **a feasibility study into a new coal power plant** in Queensland. The Morrison government has dedicated hundreds of millions of dollars to gas developments, including **helping businesses open up the potentially vast Beetaloo Basin gas field** in the Northern Territory and **pay to build a new gas-fired power station**.

Cormann cited OECD data that direct support for fossil fuel production across 50 advanced and emerging economies increased by 5% in 2020, partly due to government bailouts for state oil and electricity companies.

Taylor is due to leave Cop26 on Friday. Australia’s delegation will then be led by Jamie Isbister, the ambassador for the environment, during the second week of talks.

## Australia considering more than 100 fossil fuel projects that could produce 5% of global industrial emissions

**The coal and gas works, if approved, would result in a nearly 30% increase in emissions within Australia**



The Australian government lists 116 major coal and gas projects under development, each valued at more than \$50m. Photograph: David Gray/Getty Images/500px



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Australia has more than 100 fossil fuel developments in the pipeline that could result in nearly 1.7bn tonnes of greenhouse gases a year – equivalent to about 5% of global industrial emissions – if all were to go ahead, an analysis says.

The Australian government **lists 116 major coal and gas projects** under development, each valued at more than A\$50m and with the potential to reach a final investment decision in the next five years.

Not all will be built, but a **new report** says it is an indication of the fossil fuel development that continues in Australia, including with taxpayer support, despite the Morrison government committing to net zero emissions by 2050.

**Launching a plan** for the country to reach the target last week ahead of the Cop26 climate summit in Glasgow, the prime minister, Scott Morrison, said the government would “**not shut down our coal or gas production**”. The plan said the country’s fossil fuel export industries would continue “**through to 2050 and beyond**, supporting jobs and regional communities”.

Angus Taylor, the emissions reduction minister, has also promised to use **Cop26** to promote Australia as a safe and reliable place **to invest in gas** and hydrogen.



## Australia's 2050 net zero emissions plan relies on 'gross manipulation' of data, experts say

An analysis by the Australia Institute, a progressive thinktank, found the most recent data from the energy and resources department's chief economist, published last December, listed 72 coal and 44 gas and oil projects with the potential to be developed.

The institute also included the proposed Beetaloo Basin gas field in the Northern Territory, which the government has **committed up to \$224m** to develop as part of what it calls a **"gas-fired recovery"** from the pandemic.

Based on the estimated annual capacity of each proposal, it found together they could add about 146m tonnes to emissions within Australia (equivalent to a nearly 30% annual increase) during extraction and processing. The overwhelming bulk of the emissions – about 1.6bn tonnes – would be released offshore after the coal and gas was sold and burned for energy.

About two-thirds of the coal projects were listed as at feasibility stage. Government officials noted there was a growing preference for mine expansions over greenfield projects and that some lenders and investors would no longer finance thermal coal, which is used in electricity generation.

Richie Merzian, a former Australian government climate negotiator now with the Australia Institute, said the country continued to pursue an aggressive expansion of fossil fuels with potential emissions on the list equivalent to more than 200 coal-fired power plants. “Australia cannot claim to be acting on climate change while simultaneously expanding fossil fuel projects,” he said.

The Morrison government’s position on fossil fuels is that cost and global markets will dictate the pace of the shift to cleaner technology. It has approved **the expansion of four coalmines** since September and in July **granted a \$175m loan** for a new metallurgical coalmine in Queensland. On gas, it has said it hoped to **develop four more basins** after Beetaloo. State and territory governments under both the Coalition and Labor also back fossil fuel expansion.

Hugh Saddler, an energy analyst and an honorary associate professor at the Australian National University, said the federal government was “just plugging on absolutely business-as-usual” on fossil fuels.

“There’s been no thought about how you fit that into some supposed plan to reach net zero by 2050,” he said. “We know the important thing to stop the most catastrophic climate change is to stop fossil fuels, but Australia is putting its foot on the accelerator to develop coal and gas as quickly as it can and putting taxpayers’ dollars into doing that.”

The government’s 2050 net zero emissions plan has been **criticised for not including new policies** and relying on new technology to make deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions in the 2030s and 40s. It says it is committing \$20bn over a decade to help lower the cost of some technologies. Most of the spending is a continuation of long-standing funding for clean energy agencies.

The government has backed carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology – burying greenhouse gases from industrial sites kilometres underground – to extend their life, and committed \$250m to a “CCS technologies and hubs” program.

Australian governments have previously committed about \$4bn in funding for CCS, but it has failed to prove commercially viable. The country has one operating CCS plant, at Chevron’s Gorgon gas development in Western

Australia. It has suffered **delays** and **operational problems**, and captures only a portion of the emissions at the site.

The gas company Santos confirmed on Monday it would proceed with a \$220m CCS development at the Moomba gas reservoir in South Australia after the Morrison government approved it to **earn revenue from carbon credits** for storing emissions below ground. Santos said the project **could store 1.7m tonnes of carbon dioxide a year** from 2024.

The gas industry group, the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association, said the Australia Institute's analysis should not be considered "objective, scientific or reasonable" as the thinktank had made its opposition to the industry "very clear".

Its chief executive, Andrew McConville, said it would be more constructive for people to listen to those that had recognised gas had a role to play in a low-emissions future, including the International Energy Agency, the United Nations, and Australia's former chief scientist Alan Finkel.

Some have backed gas – which has about half the emissions of coal when burned, and **more when methane leaks during extraction** – as playing an ongoing role as the world moves away from coal, but few have backed opening new gas fields.

The head of the International Energy Agency, Fatih Birol, earlier this year said there should be **"no new investments in oil, gas and coal from now"** if governments were serious about the climate crisis.

Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull on Tuesday said Australia had to "face up to the fact that we've got to stop burning coal and gas".

"The proposition that seems to be fashionable in some quarters here that we can keep on burning coal, and indeed exporting coal, and that somehow is consistent with getting to net zero by 2050, is nonsense," he told the ABC's RN Breakfast. "The reality is if we keep burning fossil fuels we will fry the planet."

