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Sent: Thursday, August 23, 2012 2:36 PM
To: mtammaro@rtenv.com
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SWITCH TO NATURAL GAS FUELS LEADS TO BIG REDUCTION IN CARBON EMISSIONS

Press Release

Picking up on a smaller year to year net emissions change from 2008 to 2009, greenhouse gas/carbon dioxide releases into the atmosphere more recently have fallen to a 20-year low in the U.S. The surprising disclosure, which came from a little-noticed U.S. Energy Department report, was attributed by government officials to power plant operators switching to cheap and plentiful natural gas from coal. Many of the world's leading climate scientists didn't see the drop coming, apparently because it happened due to market forces rather than direct government action against carbon dioxide, a heat-trapping gas. "There's a very clear lesson here. What it shows is that if you make a cleaner energy source cheaper, you will displace dirtier sources," said a University of Colorado climate expert.

Michael Mann, director of the Earth System Science Center at Penn State University, said the shift away from coal is reason for "cautious optimism" about potential ways to deal with climate change. He said it demonstrates that "ultimately people follow their wallets" on global warming.

While conservation efforts, the lagging economy and greater use of renewable energy are factors in the CO2 decline, the drop-off is due mainly to low-priced natural gas, the agency said.

Both government and industry experts said the biggest surprise is how quickly the electric industry turned away from coal. In 2005, coal was used to produce about half of all the electricity generated in the U.S. The Energy Information Agency said that fell to 34 percent in March, the lowest level since it began keeping records nearly 40 years ago.

The question is whether the shift is just one bright spot in a big, gloomy picture, or a potentially larger trend.

Coal and energy use are still growing rapidly in other countries, particularly China, and CO2 levels globally are rising, not falling. Moreover, changes in the marketplace - a boom in the economy, a fall in coal prices, a rise in natural gas - could stall or even reverse the shift. For example, U.S. emissions fell in 2008 and 2009, then rose in 2010 before falling again last year.

The International Energy Agency said the U.S. has cut carbon dioxide emissions more than any other country over the last six years. Total U.S. carbon emissions from energy consumption peaked at about 6 billion metric tons in 2007. Projections for this year are around 5.2 billion, and the 1990 figure was about 5 billion.

(Associated Press/SF Chronicle - 8/17/2012)



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