



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on December 16, 2015

## As Natural Gas Prices Drop, so Does Air Pollution

On Tuesday, natural gas prices dropped again, with January futures hitting lows not seen since March 24, 1999. Adjusted for inflation, natural gas prices are [the second-lowest ever recorded](#).

There appears to be nothing to stop the downward trend, thanks not only to softening demand (due to the weather phenomenon El Niño) and a still-weak economy, but also to increased efficiencies in the energy industry. Those efficiencies make producing natural gas profitable even at these prices.



These low, and lower, prices are driving electric power generating companies to move from coal to natural gas. Analysts at Bloomberg New Energy Finance (BNEF) couldn't be happier. As Ed King, writing for the *Guardian*, explained:

US efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions look set for a huge boost this year, with carbon pollution from the power sector set to fall to its lowest level since 1994. Record numbers of US coal-fired power plants are set to close this year, and analysts at [BNEF] say this will likely see power sector emissions drop 15.4 percent below 2005 levels. "On an emissions rate basis ... 2015 will be the cleanest year in over 60 years ..." says the report.

This is confirmed by the Western Energy Alliance:

Because natural gas is increasingly replacing coal in electricity generation, U.S. greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions have declined to the lowest level since 1994 ... more than any other country since 2006. Whereas coal once produced over 60 percent of U.S. electricity, natural gas generation has increased to about 25 percent, while coal is down to 35 percent.

Not only are the economics making sense from a cost per unit of energy point of view, but the environment benefits are as well. While the amount of carbon dioxide released by burning natural gas is half that of coal combustion, the amounts of genuine pollutants such as carbon monoxide and sulfur are scarcely measurable. Natural-gas byproducts also generate 99-percent lower particulates than does the burning of coal. All of this has taken concerns about "acid rain" virtually out of the national conversation.

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In addition to the low price of natural gas pushing the power generation industry away from coal, it is also changing the transportation sector. According to the Department of Energy (DOE), about half of all air pollution (and more than 80 percent of air pollution in cities) is produced by cars and trucks in the United States. When cars and trucks shift from gasoline to compressed natural gas, the reduction in GHGs is remarkable. As noted by NaturalGas.com:

According to the EPA, compared to traditional vehicles, vehicles operating on compressed natural gas have reductions in carbon monoxide emissions of 90 to 97 percent, and reductions in carbon



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dioxide emissions of 25 percent. Nitrogen oxide emissions can be reduced by 35 to 60 percent, and other non-methane hydrocarbon emissions could be reduced by as much as 50 to 75 percent.

In addition, because of the relatively simple makeup of natural gas in comparison to traditional vehicle fuels, there are fewer toxic and carcinogenic emissions from natural gas vehicles, and virtually no particulate emissions.

As the free market continues to drive the shift from coal (and gasoline) to natural gas, GHGs are coming down to levels that environmentalists tried to mandate, by force, through the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. As Mike Flynn noted at Breitbart:

Since the U.S. rejected [that] agreement in 1998, greenhouse gas emissions here have fallen by more than five percent. Total emissions in the U.S., in fact, are just slightly above the 1990 levels which were the goal of the Kyoto agreement. The U.S. has made far more progress reducing its emissions than many countries [which are] subject to Kyoto's binding reductions.

When it comes to GHG emissions and other genuine air pollution, two of the biggest contributors are India and China. In fact, over the past 40 years China has increased its carbon emissions by over 900 percent, and continues to launch a new coal-fired power plant almost every week.

The reduction in the price of natural gas coupled with its concomitant reduction in GHGs has another nice benefit: It virtually cuts the legs out from under the environmentalists' arguments that government intervention is required to clean the air. That may be why President Obama called the recent Paris climate-change conference the "last best opportunity" to launch CO2-reduction mandates worldwide. With the passage of time, the free market will clean up the air naturally, leaving the question open: Why are the president and his enablers pushing so hard for worldwide rules and mandates to accomplish what is already being accomplished privately? Is there another agenda behind the push?

Just asking.

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