

Western European CO2 emissions fall slightly but below target

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BRUSSELS, Belgium - Western European nations cut their greenhouse gas emissions only slightly in 2006, with many far below a global target to curb climate change, according to EU statistics released Wednesday,

Warmer winter weather helped reduce overall emissions as people used less heating — but greenhouse gas output surged elsewhere as transport boomed, power companies turned to cheaper coal and the economy picked up after several years of sluggish growth, the European Environment Agency said.

It said the 15 oldest members of the European Union reduced greenhouse gases — carbon dioxide and other gases — by 0.8 percent in 2006 from the previous year and 2.7 percent below the 1990 level.

Those nations — including Germany, Britain and France — have agreed to cut emissions by 8 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

The EU's environment commissioner, Stavros Dimas, said countries needed to keep accelerating their efforts to cut emissions, saying the drop showed that the European economy could grow without emissions surging at the same pace.

But he warned the 12 EU newcomer states, mostly in eastern Europe, had to move faster on curbing their emissions, saying recent increases "were not helpful."

The Copenhagen-based EEA said road transport is sending far more fumes into the air — with emissions up 0.7 percent in 2006 — as cars and trucks turn to cheaper diesel. It also pointed to "sharply" rising emissions from airplanes and shipping — neither of which are covered by the U.N. Kyoto Protocol pact to cut greenhouse gas.

Efforts to reduce emissions from agriculture, chemical production and waste are also being undermined by heavier use of coal and wood for power generation, it said.

Germany, the region's largest economy, is by far the largest polluter but it has cut greenhouse gas emissions by nearly a fifth below 1990, close to its target.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's government agreed Wednesday to increase truck tolls and raise energy standards for buildings as part of a climate package aimed at cutting German greenhouse gas emissions 40 percent by 2020.

By contrast, countries that saw growth soar in the past decade have upped emissions dramatically despite recent efforts to calm them. Spain's have risen by half from 1990, Portugal's by 40 percent and both Ireland and Greece saw emissions grow by more than a quarter.

Some eastern European nations appear to have slacked off in 2006; Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia and Bulgaria all saw emissions grow from the previous year although all are well below 1990 levels because their economies declined following the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

Environmental campaigners Friends of the Earth Europe said the overall figures were alarming.

"The small emission cuts achieved are not the result of real political action but mainly due to warmer weather conditions," said Sonja Meister, the group's climate campaigner. "Europe needs to seriously step up its action against climate change."

It said the EU's 27 nations seem far off a target they set last year to cut greenhouse gas emissions by a fifth by 2020 which aims to keep global temperature rises to 2 degrees centigrade.

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