Time to end the age of fossil fuels

Background briefing, 9.11. 2013

On the eve of the Warsaw climate conference (COP19), Greenpeace urges world governments to end the age of fossil fuels with glowing messages projected on 6 coal-fired power plants in Poland. The projections, some translated into 15 languages, read:

- Climate change starts here!
- Heat waves start here!
- Sea-level rise starts here!
- Arctic melt starts here!
- Floods start here!
- Forest fires start here!
- Air pollution starts here!
- Droughts start here!
- Storms start here!
- Sea-level rise starts here!

What’s the message here?

Climate change is no longer a distant threat. It is here. In September the world’s leading climate scientists concluded in their IPCC report¹ that our greenhouse gas pollution has already warmed the atmosphere and oceans, melted glaciers, raised sea levels, changed water cycles and increased some extreme weather events. But it’s modest compared to what lies ahead, if we don’t cut emissions fast.

Every single day we continue to burn coal, oil and gas, we are making the problem worse.

Last year the World Bank issued a warning of the 4°C world we are currently drifting towards, which it said would be one of unprecedented heat waves, severe drought, and major floods in many regions, with serious impacts on ecosystems and associated services².

It doesn’t have to be this way. It’s not yet too late to avoid catastrophic climate change. On the eve of the Warsaw climate conference Greenpeace is urging world governments to speed up the transition to a clean energy future and to get serious about phasing out fossil fuels, before it really is too late.

What does Greenpeace want from the Warsaw climate conference?

First of all, governments must take decisions on bigger emissions cuts before 2020. Their current 2020 goals won’t take us even half way to the 2020 goal of preventing catastrophic warming.

Secondly, governments must lay the groundwork for a successful Paris 2015 treaty. As a new element, the treaty should include a phase out goal for fossil fuels and emissions overall. Process wise, countries must agree in Warsaw to table initial offers for new emissions reductions targets in 2014, so that there will be time to review them for adequacy and fairness, before final targets are agreed in 2015.

Thirdly, we want to see progress in the delivery of the long-term funding that rich countries have promised for developing countries and a loss and damage mechanism established.

Last but not least, we want the EU to wake up from its hibernation. Next year the EU is going to adopt new climate and energy targets for 2030, finally progressing its own climate policies. Unfortunately, the targets the commission and some member states are
contemplating are pathetically low. They are completely inadequate to meet the challenge we have ahead and have nothing to do with international fairness. We will challenge the EU for this, along with Poland, who has systematically opposed any new climate action within the EU.

Why coal?

In the past five years, coal burning was responsible for two thirds of the record CO2 emissions growth in the world and it is responsible for 44% of global fossil CO2 emissions. In addition, coal burning has serious health impacts. This October the World Health Organisation classified outdoor air pollution as a leading environmental cause of cancer deaths.

However, it’s not just coal. The International Energy Agency has concluded that keeping below dangerous warming of 2°C or more with at least 50% certainty, means **two thirds of proven reserves of coal, oil and gas must stay in the ground and not be burned**. In other words, we have already found 3-5 times more coal, oil and gas than we can ever afford to burn. This is why our activists in the Arctic and elsewhere are taking action to stop further expansion of fossil fuel exploration. **Solutions for a clean energy future exist** and transition has already started, but it must speed up big time.

Why Arctic slogans on so many languages?

The Arctic is warming at a stunning rate. According to the IPCC, the Arctic sea ice has been disappearing significantly faster than projected; the Greenland Ice Sheet was losing mass about six times faster on average in 2002-2011 than just the decade before and permafrost is thawing. This has serious consequences globally due to sea-level rise and the vicious cycles that will accelerate warming.

Instead of seeing Arctic melting as the serious warning it is and accepting that more oil has already been found that can be burned, oil giants are rushing to the Arctic to drill for more oil and gas, from ocean areas that were previously inaccessible. This is a disgusting example of the insanity that’s going on in the real world, while governments keep meeting and talking rather than acting.

More and more people around the world are taking action to stop the expansion of fossil fuel extraction and burning. That’s what the Arctic 30 activists did too, with their non-violent protest against Arctic oil drilling. Now they are in jail in Russia for the 52nd day, while the real criminals are free. **Our demonstration today is a reminder of what the Arctic 30 stand for**: quitting our addiction to fossil fuels to protect the Arctic and the planet as whole.

How about coal in Poland? Are there alternatives for coal?

Poland’s coal industry runs the dirtiest power plant fleet in the EU, causing an estimated 5,400 premature deaths from air pollution in 2010. The largest point source of CO2 in Europe and the 5th largest in the world is also found in Poland – the Belchatów lignite power plant, 150 kilometers from Warsaw. It is also one of the two worst sources of air pollution in all of Europe, causing an estimated 1,000 premature deaths in 2010.
The host of this year’s UN climate talks has a once-in-a-generation opportunity: much of Poland’s coal-fired power-plants are at the end of their lifespan and will need replacement over the coming years. So it’s now that the country needs to make the choice.

By 2030 Poland could halve its coal demand, quadruple its renewable energy use and create 100,000 new jobs in the energy sector, if the right incentives are put in place. Contrary to the often repeated myth, switching to clean energy would not destroy the Polish economy but rather create new opportunities in a country with a high unemployment rate.

Unfortunately, the Polish Government has so far remained stuck in the past, planning to rely blindly on coal as the country’s main energy source, ignoring its catastrophic impacts on the world climate, the environment and on the health of people. This government policy is not supported by the Polish population, who would overwhelmingly prefer an energy policy based on renewables over conventional fossil fuels, according to polls. The Polish government has failed to implement numerous EU directives relating to renewable energy and climate action and prevented other EU countries too from moving ahead by blocking decisions on new climate targets.

Greenpeace urges the Polish government to reconsider its approach, which is locking the country into a dirty, dangerous Yesterday.

Are you suggesting that all these extreme weather events are caused by climate change?

No, we aren’t. Extreme weather events have existed before and they do occur naturally but climate change threatens to make them more frequent and more intense. Weather on steroids. Attributing single weather events to human-caused climate change will remain difficult and regional trends vary from global trends. But the overall long-term pattern is consistent with the widely accepted predictions of climate change impacts. It’s enough to justify drastic emissions cuts, along with adaptation and preparedness measures that can significantly reduce human misery.

All weather events are now affected by climate change, as the environment in which they occur is warmer and moister. As the planet heats, weather patterns are destabilized. Warm air sucks more water from the ground and holds more water contributing to droughts in some areas and torrential rain in others. Changes in many extreme weather and climate events have been observed, although the level of confidence in these changes varies widely depending on the type of the extreme and the regions considered.

The World Meteorological Organisation named 2001-2010 the decade of climate extremes, noting that the decade was the warmest on record. Although it’s too early to distinguish the scale of human influence from natural climate variability, one can simply conclude that we have been warned.

Super typhoon Haiyan - The most powerful storm ever to make landfall?

As governments were approaching Warsaw, the Super Typhoon Haiyan, possibly the strongest tropical cyclone ever to make landfall, hit the Philippines. This massive storm gained much of its intensity as it travelled across exceedingly warm waters that extend to great depth. In the western North Pacific the subsurface warm layer has increased in depth, making more heat energy available to drive and intensify typhoons.
Even a small increase in the ocean’s warmth can pump up an existing storm’s power and add to its rain-fall. Sadly, such intense and destructive storms are likely to become more normal in the future as global warming intensifies. Cyclones are already one of the world’s most devastating natural disasters, causing catastrophic loss of life and billions of dollars in damages. As global ocean and atmospheric temperatures continue to increase, scientists expect tropical cyclones in some regions to become more intense with increased rainfall and wind speed, posing an even greater threat.

For more info, see the following background briefings:
- Coal – Yesterday’s Energy
- Poland at a Crossroad
- Greenpeace: The Warsaw Demands
- What is the IPCC saying and what does it mean?

These and other Greenpeace COP19 material can be found at: [http://greenpeace.org/cop19](http://greenpeace.org/cop19)

---

1 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 5th Assessment Report, Working Group 1 report. Summary for Policymakers.
2 World Bank (2012) Turn Down the Heat. Why a 4°C Warmer World Must be Avoided
3 Greenpeace’s Energy [R]evolution scenario, developed together with the German Space Agency (DLR) and in cooperation with the Global Wind Energy Council (GWE) and the European Renewable Energy Council (EREC) paves the way for a sustainable energy future, where over 80% of world’s energy is provided by renewable energy in 2050. It is cited by REN21 as “the most widely recognized and thorough projection made by renewable energy advocates”.
5 CARMA database ([http://carma.org](http://carma.org)); latest data is for 2009.
6 Estimated health impacts from Bulgarian Maritsa Iztok 2 lignite power plant are at par with Belchatów. Greenpeace International 2013: Silent Killers. Why Europe must replace coal power with green energy. [http://www.greenpeace.org/international/Silent-Killers/](http://www.greenpeace.org/international/Silent-Killers/)