

Tomorrow's New York Times has an [interesting article](#) on the future of coal-fired electric power in the United States.

Coal is responsible [for fully 20% of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide](#), according to the Pew Center on Global Climate Change. "Clean coal," meaning coal plants that result in no net emissions of carbon dioxide, would be possible only with successful implementation of technology to capture and store all the carbon dioxide produced by coal-fired power plants. (Digression: [This article](#) by Jacob Leibenluft in Slate discusses the confusion over the term "clean coal" in the vice-presidential debate in early October of last year. As Leibenluft notes, the coal industry's trade association, the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity, [defines "clean coal technology"](#) as "[a]ny technology to reduce pollutants associated with the burning of coal that was not in widespread use prior to the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990," and takes credit for implementing clean coal technology. But given the focus of many environmentalists and policymakers on coal's enormous contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, the industry's definition and its pride in reducing traditional pollutants miss the point, perhaps intentionally.)

So is carbon-neutral coal power in our future? As the Times article discusses, carbon capture and storage is not yet commercially viable or technologically proven. And many coal plants are not located in places where storage is thought to be possible. [This post](#) by Joseph Romm at Climate Progress Blog summarizes some reasons why we might not want to bet our future on this technology, and links to some interesting research and other sources.

Meanwhile, coal plants are still being built with massive carbon emissions, and much of our nation's power grid relies on coal. In the City of Los Angeles, over 45% of our electric power still comes from out of state coal-fired power plants, and the long term contracts that the City has with the companies providing that power make it challenging for the city to meet the state's goals and requirements for reducing greenhouse gas emissions over the coming years. The Times article focuses on efforts by power companies in the U.S. to build more plants. And even worse, coal-fired power has been increasing in other countries; in China, estimates have [ranged from about 1.5 new plants per week to as many as three or four per week \(!\)](#).

In the end, development of carbon capture and storage will be necessary in order to mitigate carbon emissions from any future coal power plants, if those plants continue to be built. But we cannot carbon-sequester our way out of climate

change. We have to focus on efficiency, on promoting renewable energy sources, and on providing incentives to China and other fast-developing nations to do the same. And certainly, it's just a mistake to allow construction and operation of new coal-fired power plants now, without even the hope of capturing carbon from those plants.