Today is the national day of the Netherlands: *Koningsdag*, or King's Day. This holiday is typically celebrated with enormous street parties and outdoor flea markets. Of course, the 2020 edition is different, with the government asking residents to stay indoors in a "*Woningsdag*," or Home Day, to limit the spread of the coronavirus.



A typical King's Day. Photo by Flickr user darkdiva.

In the world of climate law, the Netherlands has been in the news because of a series of rulings, culminating in one by the Supreme Court, in favor of the environmental advocacy organization Urgenda (1, 2, 3). These require the government to reduce the country's 2020 greenhouse gas emissions by 25% (here and below, relative to 1990). Although the Netherlands produces about 0.4% of the world's annual emissions, looking at whether and how it could meet the court-mandated emissions limits is informative.

Quantitatively, the Netherlands' 2018 (the latest year available) greenhouse gas emissions were down only 15%. In December — before the COVID19 crisis — NL's Environmental Assessment Agency estimated that emissions in 2020 would be 20%-21% lower than the base year. On Friday, the Agency released a brief report on the impact of COVID19 on emissions. In this, a relatively optimistic scenario (with respect to the disease) would lead to a 24%-25% drop this year, while a pessimistic one to a 27%-29% decline. Thus, the Netherlands might meet the *Urgenda* limit, but

largely for undesirable and unintended reasons. The report also emphasizes that, in the long term, the pandemic will have a limited effect on emissions. So even if the *Urgenda* limit is satisfied, this would be temporary.

Nevertheless, also on Friday, the governing cabinet issued a set of measures to reduce the emissions of carbon dioxide, the most important greenhouse gas, to comply with the high court's ruling. Recognizing that any reductions this year due to COVID19 will be temporary, it has an eye on the future. This is sensible, as the Netherlands must contribute to the European Union's 2030 target of a 45% cut. However, these measures' impacts will almost entirely be post-2020 because they will require some time for their details to be agreed upon, to come into legal force, and to then affect emissions.

Furthermore, it is unclear what the measures' effect on total emissions will be. Their centerpiece — accounting for half or more of forecast reductions — is emissions limits on coal-fired electricity plants. But the document does not say where the demanded electricity will subsequently be produced once Dutch electricity plants scale down. Europe has a highly integrated electrical grid, in which lessened production in one country causes greater production elsewhere. Importantly, although all EU member states must reduce their emissions, less cuts are demanded of the the poorer eastern ones. Because those countries rely more on coal, the net effect of limiting coal use in western member states can be an increase in emissions.

Regardless, Urgenda is claiming the measures as a victory. This may be justified, as without the court case the center-right cabinet might not have introduced them. On the other hand, the real driver here is EU policy. Although there was to be an ambitious "European Green Deal," climate change may have lowered in the European Commission's priorities as a result of COVID19. The next few months should be revealing.