

Coal has black future

Coal is having a rough start to the year, but there are still some voices that continue to tout its benefits for humanity. Sapon Pornchokchai, in his article “Is Greenpeace being flexible with the truth?” (Bangkok Post Sunday, Jan 10) claiming coal is cheap, safe and abundant, is one of them.

That the age of coal is over must be a daunting prospect for the coal industry and its many spin doctors. The International Energy Agency (IEA) has said solar, not coal, is the best option for the energy poor and pointed it out in its latest report that global demand for coal has ground to a halt for the first time in two decades.

Even some of the biggest consumers of coal are kicking their addiction to coal. China recently announced plans to halt new coal mine approvals for the next three years and close 1,000 mines as part of its fight against air pollution. While in the US, the government announced that it will halt new federal coal leases while it reviews the programme allowing coal mines on public land.

As CoalSwarm reported: “Two-thirds of coal-fired power plants proposed worldwide since 2010 have been stalled or cancelled”. International financial institutions such as the World Bank, Export-Import Bank of the United States, Norway’s sovereign wealth fund and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, have now stopped investing in coal-fired plants.

To argue that coal is good for Thailand is clearly ignoring a global trend rejecting its use, but it’s also ignoring its impact on people health.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition in scientific and medical communities of the severe health risks of PM2.5, the small airborne particulate that the World Health Organisation officially designated as a Group 1 carcinogen in 2013 and a leading environmental cause of cancer deaths.

In the Human Cost of Coal Power study, we released in November 2015 with researchers from Harvard University, data showed that pollution from existing coal plants lead to 1,550 premature deaths per year in Thailand alone. Based on state-of-the-art atmospheric modelling and the best available data on health and on emissions, our researchers found that BLCP and Gheco-One coal plants at Map Ta Phut in Rayong will cause about 360 premature deaths each year.

Fine particulates from coal-fired power plants such as PM2.5 can be transported by wind, spreading over hundreds of kilometres affecting human health and the environment. This is why Mr Sapon’s claims are misleading. From “The Human Cost of Coal Power” study it is projected that BLCP and Gheco-One coal plants can significantly affect air quality in the nearby tourism destinations of Koh Samet, Koh Samae San and Pattaya as well as the entire Bangkok metropolis, particularly from February to September when the predominant wind direction is from south to southwest. During worst-case conditions, the two power plants can increase daily average PM2.5 levels in the tourist areas by 40% and in the city of Bangkok by 20% compared with yearly average levels.

We've worked in communities across Thailand, and raised the voices of people rejecting coal plants in their local environments. It is time we listen to their voices rather than the proponents of a dying industry and embrace viable, safer energy alternatives.

To deny that coal is not impacting public health, or contributing to global climate change, is to deny science. Let's embrace the future rather than be stuck with an energy source of the past.

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