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Duke Energy pledges zero carbon emissions by 2050, in a further move away from coal

BY BRUCE HENDERSON

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Some advocates for closing plants say the changes aren't coming soon enough. BY STEPHANIE BUNAO | CASSIE COPE

Charlotte-based Duke Energy pledged Tuesday to release no net carbon emissions by 2050,

becoming what the company says is the largest U.S. power generator to make that commitment.

The non-binding goal was spurred largely by Duke’s increasing reliance on natural gas, which is cheaper and releases fewer planet-warming emissions than the coal that has fallen out of favor in recent years. Carbon dioxide is a heat-trapping gas that is widely linked to climate change.

Duke’s commitment also depends on continued use of nuclear power plants, expansion of solar and wind energy and development of new technologies, such as large-scale energy storage and the capture and storage of carbon emissions.

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With the announcement, Duke also accelerated a goal set in 2017 to reduce carbon emissions by 40% by 2030, compared to 2005 levels. That goal will now be at least a 50% reduction by 2030, a target Duke expects to meet without new technology.

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“Getting to net-zero carbon emissions, while ensuring energy remains reliable and affordable, will require new technologies. That’s the very reason we need to act now,” Duke chairman and CEO Lynn Good said in a statement. “We must continue leveraging today’s technologies while sustaining investment in innovation for this vision to become reality.”

Duke says it has already cut emissions 31% since 2005, which it says would meet the 2025 goal of the Paris agreement on global climate change. President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the agreement in 2017, saying the pact was unenforceable and would harm American industry.

Despite Trump’s skepticism, Duke spokeswoman Erin Culbert said a groundswell of support from the company’s investors, customers and communities it serves continues to call for reducing carbon emissions.

“We’ve been able to make really good progress over the last 10 years no matter who is in office, and we expect that progress to continue in the future,” she said.



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NUCLEAR ENERGY IS KEY

Duke says it expects to double its generation by solar, wind and other renewable forms of energy by 2025.

Duke had 3,000 megawatts of commercial renewable energy last year, and expects to double that by 2023. Its regulated utilities, such as those that serve customers in the Carolinas, will own 500 megawatts by the end of 2019 and expects that to at least double by 2025.

It's also invested research money, at its [Mount Holly laboratory](#) and elsewhere, into technology to store energy long-term and to build self-sustaining microgrids that combine renewable energy with battery storage.

Duke has moved away from coal for a decade, closing half its coal-fired plants in North Carolina. The drilling method called fracking has tapped new deposits of natural gas, driving its price down. Duke is a partner in the proposed [Atlantic Coast Pipeline](#) to ship gas 600 miles from West Virginia into Virginia and North Carolina, although lawsuits have halted its construction.

But Duke calls continued reliance on nuclear energy, one of its bedrock sources of energy, "central to our ability to meet these (carbon) goals." Its six nuclear plants in the Carolinas are aging, with their federal licenses expiring between 2030 and 2046. But Duke hopes for new technologies such as small, modular plants to emerge.

Duke Energy Carolinas, the utility that serves Charlotte, has [reported to N.C. regulators](#) that it expects coal-fired generation to drop from 29% this year to 18% by 2033. Nuclear power would drop slightly to 21% by 2033. Natural gas would increase from 24% this year to 32% in 2033, while renewable energy and efficiency measures would grow from 8% to 16%.

Duke acknowledges that indirect factors called offsets and credits might be applied in calculating emission reductions by 2050.

PRAISE AND CRITICISM

A half-dozen clean energy advocacy groups, including the [Clean Air Task Force](#) and the [American Wind Energy Association](#), released statements supporting Duke's emissions goal.

"Market signals like these demonstrate that transitioning to clean energy can be as positive for affordability and reliability as it is for addressing climate change," said Rich Powell, executive director of [ClearPath](#), a group founded by Charlotte Republican [Jay Faison](#). "ClearPath applauds Duke Energy's plan to lean in on energy innovation to create the new technologies needed to achieve their goal."

Other advocates said Duke's carbon goal falls short of a serious commitment. Among them was NC WARN, a Durham-based group that consistently chides Duke for not moving more quickly to clean energy, which called Duke's announcement "smoke and mirrors."

Despite Duke's move away from coal, WARN said, the natural gas it has shifted to is also a fossil fuel that produces greenhouse emissions. The group cites research that methane, a gas that has many times the heat-trapping ability of carbon dioxide, leaks from gas wells and pipelines before it ever reaches power plants.

"The (zero carbon) announcement is flatly belied by Duke's separate, 15-year plan for the Carolinas, filed with regulators on Sept. 3, which shows a huge increase in the use of fracked "natural" gas – a 22% increase even over last year's plan – and a continuing, pathetic commitment to renewable energy and battery storage," WARN said in a statement.

Duke's Culbert, in response, said updated planning documents filed with regulators will reflect the goals announced Tuesday. Duke has replaced nearly 1,500 miles of cast iron pipe in its natural gas distribution lines, a leading source of methane leaks, she said.

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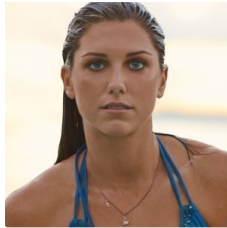
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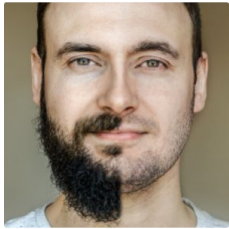
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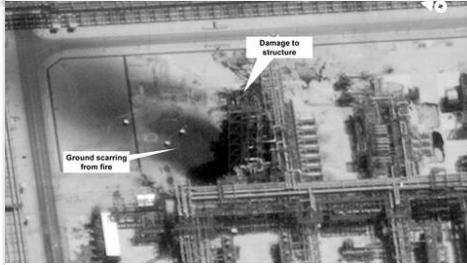
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