

Cheap coal said top enemy in fighting global warming

By Alister Doyle, Environment Correspondent

OSLO, Sept 28 (Reuters) - Cheap coal will be the main enemy in a fight against global warming in the 21st century because high oil prices are likely to encourage a shift to coal before wind or solar power, a top economist said on Thursday. Coal emits far more greenhouse gases, blamed by most scientists for a rise in world temperatures, per unit of energy when burnt in power plants or factories than oil or natural gas. "The most important environmental problem in the 21st century is coal, or you could say coal is the most important enemy," Ottmar Edenhofer, chief economist at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany, told Reuters.

"Coal is cheap, it is plentiful and it is quite evenly distributed over the entire planet," he said, noting that oil was more concentrated in a few regions such as the Middle East. Many countries, led by the United States, are trying to create "clean coal" technologies to strip heat-trapping gases from the exhausts of power plants or factories. The gases could then be buried below ground. "Coal plays an important geopolitical role, and for the next 300 years it will be plentiful," he said. With oil prices above about \$50-\$60 a barrel "then it is competitive to go from liquids to coal".

Electricity can be generated more cheaply and easily from coal than from renewable energy sources. Without restraints on greenhouse gases from coal "the next substitution process is not from oil to wind power, or to solar power or to biomass," he said. "The next step would be liquids to coal," he said. Switching to coal would be less attractive if there were a global penalty for emitting carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, he said.

CUT EMISSIONS

Countries bound by the U.N.'s Kyoto Protocol have agreed to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 5.2 percent below 1990 levels by 2008-12. The European Union has set up a system for trading carbon dioxide from industry in a bid to cut emissions. In the European market for carbon dioxide, prices for CO2 emissions are around 12.6 euros (\$16.02) per tonne. Burning a tonne of coal typically releases more than 3 tonnes of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere.

The scientific panel that advises the United Nations says that rising temperatures are likely to disrupt the climate and trigger ever more floods, heatwaves, erosion and drive up world sea levels by 9-88 cm (3.5-34.6 inches) by 2100. Coal represented 25.1 percent of total world energy supply in 2004, little changed from 24.8 percent in 1973, according to the International Energy Agency which advises governments in rich nations. It forecasts that coal's share of rising energy use will dip to 23.1 percent in 2010 and to 22.9 percent by 2030. President George W. Bush pulled out of Kyoto in 2001, arguing that it would cost U.S. jobs and unfairly left out developing nations from the first set of targets for 2012.