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Coal comeback or climate setback?

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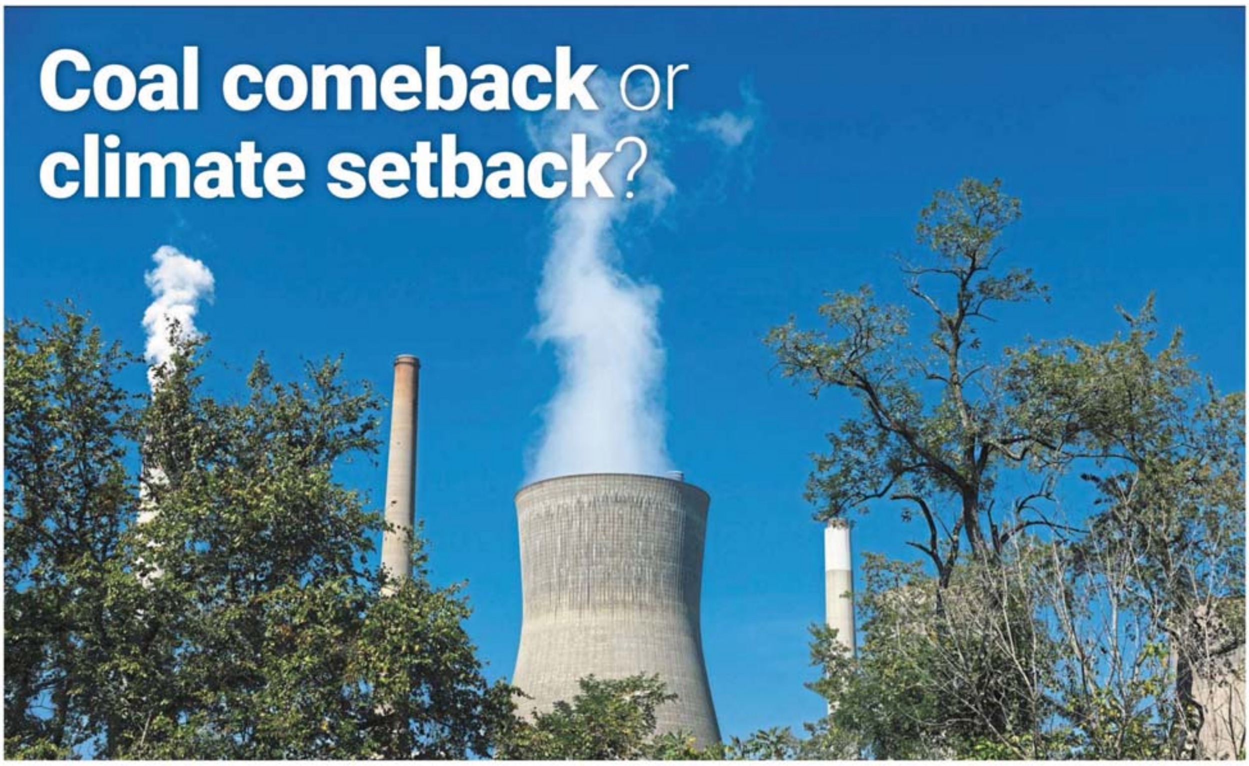

By BRAD PLUMER and LISA FRIEDMAN

THE Trump administration has unveiled a coordinated plan to revive the mining and burning of coal – the single largest contributor to climate change worldwide.

Coal use has fallen sharply in the United States since 2005, displaced in many regions by cheaper and cleaner natural gas, wind and solar power.

But in a sweeping series of measures aimed at improving the economics of coal, the Interior Department said it would open 5.3mil ha of federal land for coal mining and reduce the royalty rates that companies must pay to extract it.

The Energy Department announced US$625mil in funding to upgrade existing coal plants across the country – many of which have been closing rapidly – to extend their operating life spans.

Meanwhile, the Environmental Protection Agency said it would repeal dozens of regulations introduced under the Biden administration that limited carbon dioxide, mercury and other pollutants from coal plants. It would also rewrite a rule restricting wastewater pollution from power plants, a measure long criticised by the industry as costly.

In a familiar tableau, miners in hard hats stood as a backdrop as administration officials gathered at the Interior Department and repeated a phrase US President Donald Trump now expects of anyone discussing the black, combustible rock: "clean, beautiful coal".

The announcements on Sept 29 came just days after Trump told the UN General Assembly that the United States was ready to "stand ready to provide any country with abundant, affordable energy supplies if you need them" – referring to liquefied natural gas, oil and coal.

Trump has promoted coal since his first campaign in 2016, often appearing alongside miners at rallies. Yet the industry's decline has been relentless.

While coal plants once generated nearly half of America's electricity, they produced just 16% last year. Hundreds of plants have been retired since the mid-2000s as utilities shifted to natural gas and renewables.

Tighter regulations on air and water pollution have made coal burning increasingly expensive.

> "Our nation can lead in technology, but if we don't lead in electrical production, we're going to lose the AI race."
>
> Doug Burgum

Mining itself – long associated with air pollution, water contamination and black lung disease – has faced growing restrictions.

"This is an industry that was under assault," said Doug Burgum, the Interior Secretary, who joined Lee Zeldin, the EPA administrator, in blaming regulations for what they described as an "ideological war on coal".

Chris Wright, the Energy Secretary, took a jab at environmentalists, saying coal was "out of fashion with the chardonnay set in San Francisco; Boulder, Colorado; and New York City".

During the hour-long event, the phrase "climate change" was conspicuously absent. Instead, officials framed coal as an economic necessity.

How much the administration can actually revitalise the industry remains uncertain. During Trump's first term, around 100 coal plants shut down, and employment in coal mining continued to fall.

Still, the outlook has recently brightened slightly. The surge in demand for electricity – fuelled by the boom in artificial intelligence and data centres – has led utilities to delay the closure of more than 50 coal-burning units, according to America's Power, an industry trade group.

With pollution limits now set to be loosened, more plants could stay open longer or run more frequently.

The administration has also taken more aggressive action to keep coal plants operating.

At the September announcement, Wells Griffith, the Undersecretary for Energy, cited a recent department study claiming the US power grid faced a higher risk of blackouts if too many coal plants retire.

That finding has been sharply criticised by clean-energy groups and Democratic-led states as overly pessimistic about the ability of other fast-growing energy sources – wind, solar, batteries and natural gas – to strengthen the grid.

Holly Bender, chief programme officer at the environmental group Sierra Club, said the administration's actions would worsen pollution and drive up costs for households.

Even as it doubles down on fossil fuels, the administration has taken steps to restrict the growth of renewable energy, criticising wind and solar as unreliable and too dependent on the weather.

Globally, coal demand is still rising, driven largely by China and a handful of other developing nations.

According to the International Energy Agency, worldwide coal use reached a record high last year, though the agency expects it to plateau in the coming years.

Burgum cited that trend as justification for America's renewed investment.

"Our nation can lead in technology, but if we don't lead in electrical production, we're going to lose the AI race."

As China burns more coal, it also leads the world in building wind and solar farms.

The country recently announced plans to start reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 2035 – a timeline environmentalists argue should push other major economies to accelerate, not reverse, their clean-energy transitions.

Trump's coal push, however, signals a clear bet on the past – one that pits nostalgia and politics against the mounting economic momentum of renewables. — ©2025 The New York Times Company

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(Top) A coal-fired power plant in Winfield, West Virginia. — Alyssa Schukar/The New York Times

(Left) A truck at a coal mine in Ebensburg, Pennsylvania. — Andrew Mangum/The New York Times

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