

Kemfert, Claudia; Wittenberg, Erich

Article

"In Germany, we need to phase out lignite step by step": Seven questions for Claudia Kemfert

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Prof. Dr. Claudia Kemfert, Head in the Department of Energy, Transportation, Environment at DIW Berlin

SEVEN QUESTIONS FOR WITH CLAUDIA KEMFERT

»In Germany, we need to phase out lignite step by step«

1. Mrs. Kemfert, what role will lignite play in the future of Germany's energy supply? In the future, lignite will have less of a role in supplying energy in Germany because we want to fulfill the international climate targets in this country. We aspire to an energy transition that has the goal of boosting renewable energy's share of production to at least 80 percent by 2050. This is why lignite's share will drop sharply in the coming years.
2. That means the agreed upon national and international climate protection targets cannot be achieved with lignite? That's right—lignite would prevent us from fulfilling the national and international climate targets. Of all the ways of producing electricity, lignite-fired power plants have the highest greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants. This is why we need to phase out lignite step by step in Germany.
3. In this context, what do you think of Brandenburg's Energiestrategie 2030, the energy plan they are currently revising? With its revision of Energiestrategie 2030, the state government of Brandenburg has an excellent opportunity to establish a lignite phase-out compatible with the societal structures in the mining region. Brandenburg is already reliant on renewable energy to some extent and also aims to implement the transition to sustainable energy. The essential cornerstones of the new Energiestrategie 2030 would be to continue to develop renewable energy, while at the same time implementing a coal phase-out that would give the people employed in the industry job prospects.
4. In some areas of Germany there are plans to expand existing strip mines. This contradicts the phase-out strategy, doesn't it? Yes, it is contradictory. And we also have clear evidence that we do not need any additional surface mining capacity. The current strip mines certainly contain enough coal to guarantee coal-based electricity until 2030. For this reason, policy makers should adopt a plan to stop developing new strip mines.
5. Vattenfall GmbH sold its German lignite division to a Czech consortium of buyers (EPH) last fall. What consequences does the change in operator have for the lignite industry in Brandenburg? The key effect is that the financial risk will become greater because of lacking transparency, above all with regard to the issue of whether the consortium's reserve is adequate to cover the cost of the coal phase-out. This is why it is important to have an independent appraisal of how high the reserve levels are and actually have to be, and if they are safeguarded sufficiently. If not, measures must be taken to remedy the situation. We propose that policy makers investigate a variety of options—for example, within the framework of the new climate action commission. The point is to set up a legal framework for transparency with verification of the reserves at regular intervals. A fund or private foundation could be established, or security could be increased by other means, such as a binding letter of comfort or a law on follow-up liability.
6. Thousands of jobs are dependent on lignite. What would a socially sensitive phase-out of the lignite industry look like? As the state and federal governments draft the coal phase-out strategy, a structurally and socially sensitive lignite phase-out can be achieved by demanding they provide lignite industry employees with job prospects.
7. What time period are we talking about here? A maximum of 30 years. This is why it is important for policy makers to create a structurally aware phase-out that opens up a new future for those employed in the lignite industry—which goes hand in hand with qualifications for new jobs.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg
To hear the recorded interview in German, visit www.diw.de/interview



DIW Berlin – Deutsches Institut
für Wirtschaftsforschung e.V.
Mohrenstraße 58, 10117 Berlin
T +49 30 897 89 -0
F +49 30 897 89 -200

Publishers

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