

In September 2019, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis made a pledge to end all dependence on lignite by 2028, saying all but one of the country's coal-burning plants would close by 2023.

"We are saying goodbye to the coal age," Greece's energy state secretary told EURACTIV following recent announcement that the country's last lignite plant will be shut down in 2025, three years earlier than planned.

Greece's Public Power Corp. (PPC), the country's biggest energy company, said it was abandoning its plan to operate its Ptolemaida 5 lignite plant, which is still under construction, until 2028.

Instead, the plant will switch from lignite to fossil gas in 2025, said PPC, a 51% state-owned company.

The move was announced on 22 April, weeks after PPC surpassed expectations with its first-ever green bond, marking the country's decisive move away from coal.

"The shutdown of all lignite plants by 2025, earlier than the original plan, marks the entry of Greece into the club of countries that fully adopt the principles of clean energy, while sealing the transformation of PPC into a modern energy player in Europe," said Greek State Secretary for Energy Alexandra Sdoukou

"We are saying goodbye to the coal age and looking forward to a new period of development for the country with a renewable sign and high competitive potential," she told EURACTIV in emailed comments.

But PPC's departure from coal is driven mostly by economics. Two years ago, the Greek government was struggling to find buyers for three coal-fired power plants owned by PPC, a company which was losing one billion euros per year, in part due to its heavy reliance on coal.

PPC had already announced plans to close all of Greece's other existing lignite plants by 2023. With Ptolemaida 5 not scheduled to come online until 2022, campaigners expressed doubts about whether it will burn lignite at all.

"PPC has finally realised it has wasted billions on Ptolemaida 5, and caused untold damage to people's health and the Greek economy," said Mahi Sideridou, from the Europe Beyond Coal campaign.

"The fact that the EU's fourth-largest lignite producer is abandoning coal tells you everything you need to know about the state of the industry. Now PPC needs to turn its full attention to the country's enormous renewable energy potential. Former coal communities deserve far better than to be tied to more fossil fuels, like fossil gas."

Campaigners' attention is now turning to the plant's planned conversion to fossil gas.

"The constant rise of the CO2 prices is ramping up the pressure on coal power plants across Europe, but switching from coal to fossil gas is not the solution," said Dimitris Tsekeris from WWF Greece.

"Fossil gas is in the same position as coal was 15 years ago, and will face a similar crisis of stranded assets in years to come. We need to lock-in sustainable alternatives, not more fossil fuels. Fossil gas cannot be part of this plan," he said.

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