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How Deadly Is Your Kilowatt? We Rank The Killer Energy Sources

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Everyone's heard of the carbon footprint of different energy sources, the largest footprint belonging to coal because every kWhr of energy produced emits about 900 grams of CO2. Wind and nuclear have the smallest carbon footprint with only 15 g emitted per kWhr, and that mainly from concrete production, construction, and mining of steel and uranium. Biomass is supposedly carbon neutral as it sucks CO2 out of the atmosphere before it liberates it again later, although production losses are significant depending upon the biomass.

Coal-fired power plants have a dramatic effect on human health and the environment as well as total health care costs [+]

Carbon emissions and physical footprints are known as *externalities* and are those vague someone-has-to-pay-eventually kind of thing it's hard to put a value on. Proposed carbon footprint taxes are in the range of $15 to $40/ton of CO2 emitted, but assigning a physical footprint cost depends on the region, ecosystem sensitivities

and importance. A hundred-acre wetlands to be flooded by a new dam is worth more to the planet than a barren hundred-acre strip under a solar array in the Mojave (P. Bickel and R. Friedrich, 2005).

But an energy's deathprint, as it is called, is rarely discussed. The deathprint is the number of people killed by one kind of energy or another per kWhr produced and, like the carbon footprint, coal is the worst and wind and nuclear are the best. According to the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control, the National Academy of Science and many health studies over the last decade (NAS 2010), the adverse impacts on health become a significant effect for fossil fuel and biofuel/biomass sources (see especially Brian Wang for an excellent synopsis).

In fact, the WHO has called biomass burning in developing countries a major global health issue (WHO int). The table below lists the mortality rate of each energy source as deaths per trillion kWhrs produced. The numbers are a combination of actual direct deaths and epidemiological estimates, and are rounded to two significant figures.

For coal, oil and biomass, it is carbon particulates resulting from burning that cause upper respiratory distress, kind of a second-hand black lung. Our lungs just don't like burnt carbonaceous particulates, whether from coal or wood or manure or pellets or cigarettes. The actual numbers of deaths in China from coal use exceeded 300,000 last year since they have ramped up coal so fast in the last decade and they usually do not install exhaust scrubbers. The impact on their health care system has been significant in not just deaths, but in non-lethal health effects and lost days of work.

Energy Source	Mortality Rate (deaths/trillionkWhr)	
Coal – global average	100,000	(41% global electricity)
Coal – China	170,000	(75% China's electricity)
Coal – U.S.	10,000	(32% U.S. electricity)
Oil	36,000	(33% of energy, 8% of electricity)
Natural Gas	4,000	(22% global electricity)
Biofuel/Biomass	24,000	(21% global energy)
Solar (rooftop)	440	(< 1% global electricity)
Wind	150	(2% global electricity)

Hydro – global average	1,400	(16% global electricity)
Hydro – U.S.	5	(6% U.S. electricity)
Nuclear – global average	90	(11% global electricity w/Chern&Fukush)
Nuclear – U.S.	0.1	(19% U.S. electricity)

It is notable that the U.S. death rates for coal are so much lower than for China, strictly a result of regulation, particularly the Clean Air Act (Scott et al., 2005). It is also notable that the Clean Air Act is one of the most life-saving pieces of legislation ever adopted by any country in history, along with the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938) which established the 40 hour week, and Medicare in 1965. Still, about 10,000 die from coal use in the U.S. each year, and another thousand from natural gas.

Hydro is dominated by a few rare large dam failures like Banqiao in China in 1976 which killed about 171,000 people. The reason the U.S. hydro deaths are so few is, again regulation - specifically our Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC).

Workers still regularly fall off wind turbines during maintenance but since relatively little electricity production comes from wind, the totals deaths are small. Nuclear has the lowest deathprint, even with the worst-case Chernobyl numbers and Fukushima projections, uranium mining deaths, and using the Linear No-Treshold Dose hypothesis (see Helman/2012/03/10). Again, the reason the U.S. death toll is so low for nuclear is our strong Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC).

The dozen or so U.S. deaths in nuclear over the last 60 years have mostly been in the weapons complex or are modeled from general LNT effects. The reason the nuclear number is small is that nuclear produces so much electricity per unit. There just are not many nuclear plants. And the two failures have been in GenII plants with old designs that were due to human failures to heed our warnings. All new builds must be GenIII and higher, with passive redundant safety systems, and all must be able to withstand the worst case disaster, no matter how unlikely. We also must deal with our spent fuel better, something we know how to do (Deep Geologic Nuclear Waste Disposal - No New Taxes).

China has experienced significant health care costs as a result of ramping up coal so rapidly over the last fifteen years. [+]

Although it is difficult to assign a cost to these numbers, estimates have suggested a 10% increase in health care costs in countries where coal makes up a significant fraction of the energy mix, like the U.S. and Europe (NAS 2010; Cohen et al., 2005; Pope et al., 2002). These additional health costs begin to rival the total energy costs on an annual basis for the U.S. given that health care costs top $2.6 trillion, and electricity costs only exceed about $400 billion. Another way to describe this human health energy fee is that it costs about 2,000 lives per year to keep the lights on in Beijing but only about 200 lives to keep them on in New York.

Guess that's just the cost of doing business…

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*NY – 8 bkWhrs from coal, 18 bkWhrs from gas, 2 bkWhrs from oil

*Beijing – 7 bkWhrs from coal, 8 bkWhrs from oil, gas and hydro

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