Carbon emissions sharply rebound as countries lift coronavirus restrictions

Key Points

- Carbon emissions are now surging back to prepandemic levels as states and countries reopen, a grim reminder that the world is still grappling with accelerating climate change.
- By mid-June, global emissions rebounded to roughly 5% below 2019 levels and in emissions in China returned to pre-pandemic levels, according to an update in a May study published in the journal Nature Climate Change.
- During lockdowns, vehicle traffic was cut in half in the U.S. and Europe, but more people are getting back on the road and taking cars over public transportation.

NEWS

- Worldwide coronavirus lockdowns caused carbon emissions to plummet this spring, as people stayed inside their homes, factories shut down, airlines grounded their planes and traffic subsided on major highways.
- But emissions are now surging back to pre-pandemic levels as states and countries reopen, a rebound scientists have warned about since the start of the lockdowns and a grim reminder that the world is still grappling with accelerating climate change.
- In early January, global emissions were at roughly 2019 levels.
- By early April, emissions fell by about 17% during the peak lockdowns.
- But by mid-June, when countries began lifting restrictions, emissions increased to about 5% below the 2019 levels.
- The impact the pandemic will have on 2020 emissions depends on how long it takes for all lockdown measures to be lifted and how swiftly business and consumer activity returns to normal levels.
- Scientists estimate a potential reduction of 4% for the year if pre-pandemic conditions return by mid-June and a high estimate of 7% if some restrictions remain until the end of 2020.
- Scientists say the estimated 4% to 7% decline in emissions for 2020 isn’t nearly enough to combat global warming.
- The only way to actually reduce emissions long term is if countries implement clean energy policy to bring global emissions to almost zero.

Changing attitude of the world countries to control climate change

- The Trump administration is reversing more than 100 environmental regulations after three years in office and China continues to build more coal plants.
- Most changes observed in 2020 are likely to be temporary as they do not reflect structural changes in the economic, transport or energy systems.
- In fact, the economic fallout from the virus will likely hinder long-term climate change action by compromising global investments in clean energy and weakening industry environmental goals to reduce emissions.
- Many governments have failed to offer economic stimulus packages that invest in low carbon infrastructure.

Way ahead
Activities like **walking and cycling**, which allow people to socially distance, could help to cut back carbon emissions and air pollution as states and countries reopen.

Some cities are looking to address the surge in vehicle use amid reopening, including **Bogota, Colombia, New York, Paris and Berlin**, which have added **more street space** for walkers and cyclists.