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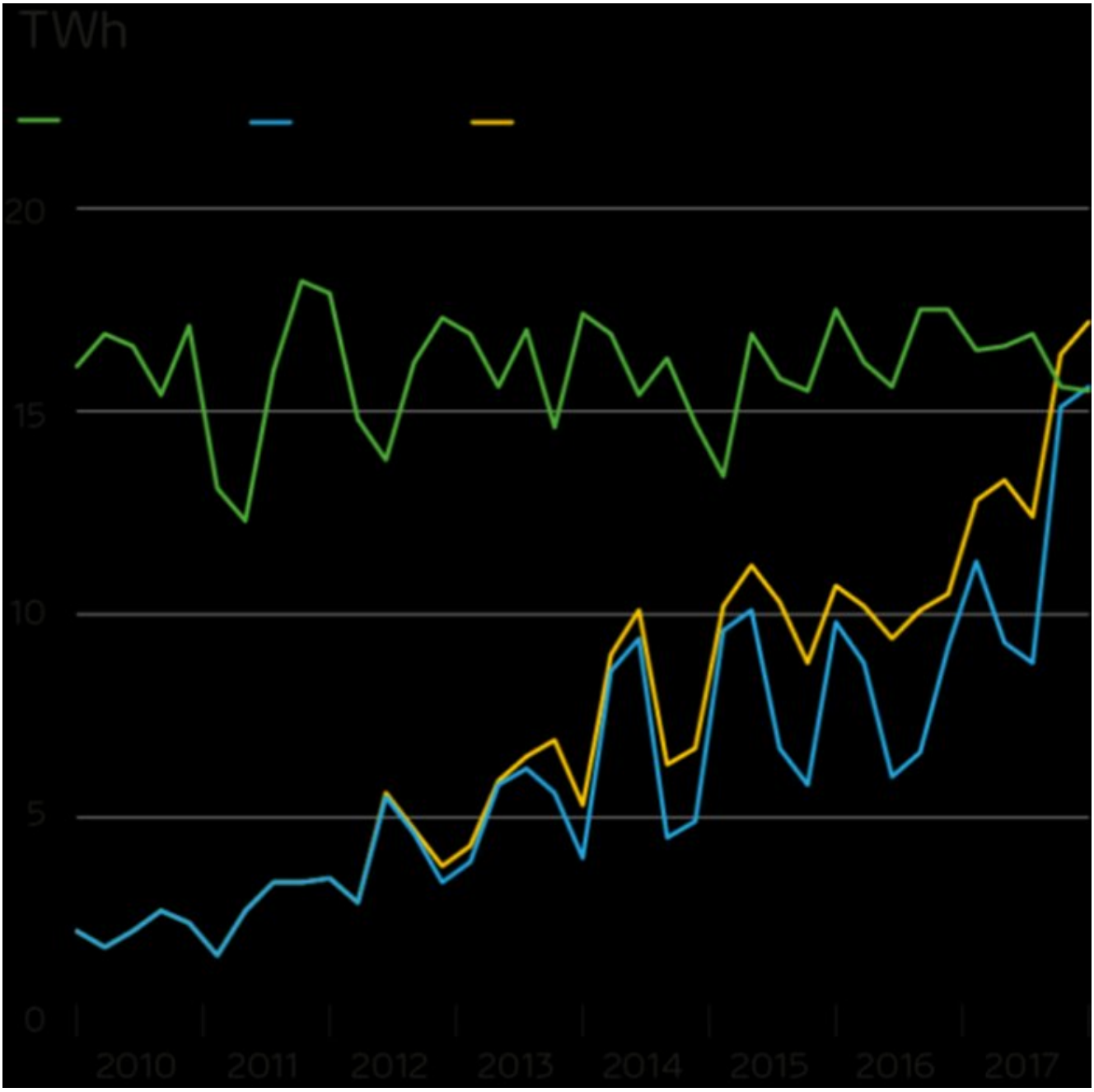
Britain’s Wind Farms Beat Out Nuclear For First Time Ever

May 17th, 2018 by **Joshua S Hill**

During the first quarter of the year, Britain’s wind farms produced more electricity than ever before and promptly surpassed the amount of electricity generated by the country’s nuclear fleet, similarly for the first time ever.

A new analysis from experts at Imperial College London and commissioned by Drax Electrical Insights showed that peak output for the UK wind industry in the first quarter of 2018 surpassed 14 gigawatts (GW) for the first time. Similarly, in the first quarter wind produced 15,560 gigawatt-hours (GWh) of electricity, beating out the nuclear fleet by 30 GWh.

Quarterly energy production from wind farms, solar and nuclear reactors



Last quarter, wind and solar together generated enough electricity to surpass nuclear's contribution to the grid, but continued wind development and strong conditions helped push wind over nuclear all on its lonesome. Similarly, researchers from Imperial College London also concluded that wind curtailment during the first quarter fell by two-thirds. New transmission links, including the recently completed Western HVDC Link between Scotland and Wales, have reduced the amount of wind energy lost and, based on rudimentary guesses, saved National Grid around 9 million per month throughout the first quarter in absent constraint payments.

The share of wind energy lost to curtailment in Britain

A new transmission link between Scotland and Wales came online in December 2017. Curtailment is often higher in summer months when demand is lower, as high wind output becomes harder to manage.

“The new Western Link is a mighty upgrade to our country’s grid infrastructure ; allowing all UK billpayers to benefit from the huge amount of cheap power being generated by Scottish wind farms,” said RenewableUK’s Executive Director Emma Pinchbeck. “It is great news for everyone that rather than turning turbines off to manage our ageing grid, the new cable instead will make best use of wind energy.”

Wind energy had a good fourth quarter in 2017, with peak output surpassing first 11 GW, and then 12 GW by the time the year came to a close. But on January 17 wind output peaked over 13 GW and, two months later on March 17, peaked above 14 GW for the first time.

Half-hourly power output from wind and nuclear during the quarter

We reported on both these peak days thanks to figures provided by Drax Electrical Insights, which showed wind peaked at 13.5 GW in January, and then went on to reach a new high output of 14.3 GW in March.

The first quarter was also particularly instructive for how the UK’s electricity grid deals with extreme weather events. A massive cold wave struck the UK in February and March — known as “the Beast from the East” — and pushed electricity demand up 10% and prices up by 50%. In fact, the six days from February 26th to March 3rd *(highlighted in blue)* were the coldest Britain has been since Christmas 2010.

“When the Beast from the East hit, it was wind that kept the lights on and businesses running in the cold, generating nearly half of the UK’s entire electricity demand at one point,” explained Emma Pinchbeck. “Overall this report shows that we are well on the way to an electricity system which is powered by cheap domestic renewable energy.”

All in all, the country’s wind farms produced 18.8% of the country’s electricity throughout the first quarter, and at their peak were supplying 47.3% of the country’s demand — yet another new record to attribute to the first quarter.

What will be interesting is to see what the second quarter figures reveal, especially for the last two weeks of April which saw the country first go a record 55 hours without using coal-generated electricity, and then a few days later break that record by going 76 hours without coal. While it was unclear from reports what filled in the gap for the latter record, *Bloomberg* noted that for the prior 55 hours record, wind turbines accounted for the lack of coal generation. According to Drax Electrical Insights figures for the days in question, wind at most accounted for 11.8 GW on Tuesday 24th of April, but whether detailed statistics confirm this or not will have to be seen.