## Comparative Life Cycle Carbon Emissions of LNG Versus Coal and Gas for Electricity Generation

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## Introduction

Natural gas currently provides 24% of the energy used by homes and businesses in the US (1). It is also an important feedstock for the chemical and fertilizer industry. In the early 1990's the price of natural gas was low (around 3/1000 ft<sup>3</sup>) and as a result there was a surge in construction of natural gas plants (2). Today, the Henry Hub price of natural gas is around 15/1000 ft<sup>3</sup> (3), and most of these plants are operating below capacity. However, natural gas consumption is expected to increase 41% by 2025 (to 30 trillion cubic feet), with demand from electricity generators growing the fastest (increasing 90% by 2025). At the same time natural gas production in North America is expected to remain fairly constant at around 24 trillion cubic feet, so that demand of imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) will increase to around 6 trillion cubic feet or 20% of the total supply by 2025 (3).

The natural gas system is the second largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the US, generating around 132 million tons of  $CO_2$  Equivalents (1). Several studies have performed emission inventories for the natural gas lifecycle from production to distribution. Usually these analyses have been performed for domestic natural gas, so that emissions from the LNG lifecycle stages have been ignored. If, as the DOE estimates suggest, larger percentages of the supply of natural gas will come from these imports, emissions from these steps in the lifecycle could influence the total natural gas lifecycle emissions. Thus, comparisons between coal and natural gas that concentrate only on the emissions at the utility plant may not be adequate. The objective of this study is to perform an analysis of the natural gas lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions taking the emissions from LNG into consideration. Different scenarios for the percentage of natural gas as LNG are analyzed. Moreover, a comparison with the coal fuel cycle greenhouse gas emissions will be presented, in order to have a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of using coal versus natural gas for electricity generation.

#### The Natural Gas Life Cycle

The natural gas life cycle starts with the production of natural gas and ends at the combustion plant. NaturalGas.org has a very detailed description of this life cycle. Readers are encouraged to visit this website if they need more information about the topic.

Geological surveys and seismic studies are used to determine the location of natural gas deposits. After these sites have been identified, wells are constructed. There are two types of well for the extraction of natural gas: oil wells and natural gas wells. Oil wells are

drilled primarily to extract oil, but natural gas can also be obtained. Natural gas wells are specifically drilled to extract natural gas.

After natural gas is extracted through the wells, it has to be processed to meet the characteristics of the natural gas used by consumers. Consumer natural gas is composed primarily of methane. However, when natural gas is extracted, it exists with other hydrocarbons such as propane and ethane. In addition, the extracted natural gas contains impurities such as water vapor and carbon dioxide that must be removed. Natural gas processing plants are usually constructed in gas producing regions. The natural gas is transported from the extraction sites to these plants through a system of low-diameter, low-pressure pipelines. At the plant, water vapor is first removed from the gas by using absorption or adsorption methods. Glycol Dehydration is an example of absorption, in which glycol, which has a chemical affinity to water, is used to absorb the vapor. Solid-Desiccant Dehydration is an example of adsorption. In this process the natural gas passes through these towers, the water particles are retained on the surface of the solids.

As previously mentioned, natural gas is extracted with other hydrocarbons that must be removed. The removal of these hydrocarbons, called Natural Gas Liquids (NGL), is done with the absorption method or the cryogenic expander process. The absorption method is similar to the water absorption method, but instead of glycol, absorbing oil is used. The cryogenic expansion method consists of dropping the temperatures of the gas causing the hydrocarbons to condense so that they can be separated from the natural gas. The absorption method is used to remove heavier hydrocarbons, while lighter hydrocarbons are removed using the cryogenic expansion process.

The final step in the processing of natural gas is the removal of sulfur and carbon dioxide. Often, natural gas from the wells contains high amounts of these two compounds, and it is called sour gas. Sulfur must be removed from the gas because it is a potentially lethal chemical if breathed. In addition, sour gas can be corrosive for the transmissions and distribution pipelines. The process of removing sulfur and carbon dioxide from the gas is similar to the absorption processes previously described.

After the natural gas is processed it enters the transmission system. In the US, this transmission system is the interstate natural gas pipeline network, which consists of thousands of miles of high-pressure pipelines that transport the gas from producing areas to high demand areas. In addition to the pipes, this pipeline system has compressor stations along the way, usually placed in 40 to 100 mile intervals. These compressor stations use a turbine or an engine to compress the natural gas and maintain the high pressure required in the pipeline. The turbines and engines generally run with a small amount of the gas from the pipeline. In addition to compressor stations, metering stations are also placed along the system to allow companies to better monitor and manage the natural gas in the pipes. Moreover valves can be found through the entire length of the pipelines to regulate flow.

Natural gas can be stored to meet seasonal demand increases or to meet sudden, shortterm demand increases. Natural gas is usually stored in underground facilities. Such facilities could be built in reconditioned depleted gas reservoirs, aquifers or salt caverns. According to the Energy Information Administration (EIA), in 2003 the total storage capacity in the United States was 8.2 billion cubic feet. 82% of this capacity was in depleted gas fields, 15% in depleted aquifers, and 3% in salt caverns. Moreover during that year, withdrawals from storage added to 3.1 billion cubic feet while injections totaled 3.3 billion cubic feet (4). It is important to note that some gas injected into underground storage becomes physically unrecoverable gas. This gas is known as base gas.

Distribution is the final step before natural gas is delivered to consumers. Local Distribution Companies transport natural gas from delivery points along the transmission system to local consumers via a low-pressure, small-diameter pipeline system. Natural gas that arrives to a city gate through the transmission system is depressurized, and filtered to remove any moisture or particulate content. In addition, Mercaptan is added to the gas to create the distinctive smell that allows leaks to be detected. Small compressors are used in the distribution system to maintain the pressure required.

When Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) is added to the mix of natural gas, three additional lifecycle stages are created: liquefaction, tanker transport, and regasification. Figure 1 shows the total life cycle of natural gas including the LNG stages.



Figure 1: Natural Gas Life Cycle Including LNG.

In the liquefaction process, natural gas is cooled and pressurized to convert it to liquid form, reducing its volume by a factor of 610 (5). These liquefaction plants are generally located in coastal areas of LNG export countries. Currently 75% of the LNG imported to the US comes from Trinidad, but this percentage is expected to decrease as more imports come from Russia, the middle east, and southeast Asia (4). LNG tankers bring this gas to the US. According to EIA, there were 151 LNG tankers in operation worldwide as of October 2003. The majority of these tankers have the capacity to carry more than 120,000 cubic meters of liquefied natural gas (equivalent to 2.59 billion cubic feet of natural gas, enough gas to supply an average of 31,500 residences for a year (4)) and the total fleet capacity is 17.4 million cubic meters of liquid (equivalent to 366 billion cubic feet of natural gas). There are currently fifty-five ships under construction that will increase total fleet capacity to 25.1 million cubic meters of liquid (equivalent to 527 billion cubic feet of natural gas) in 2006 (6).

Regasification facilities are the last step LNG must pass through before going into the US pipeline system. Regasification facilities are LNG marine terminals where LNG tankers unload their gas. These facilities consist of storage tanks and vaporization equipment that warms the LNG to return it to the gaseous state. There are currently 5 LNG terminals in operation in the US: Lake Charles, Louisiana; Elba Island, Georgia; Cove Point, Maryland; Everett, Massachusetts; and a recently opened offshore terminal in the Gulf of Mexico. These terminals have a combined base load capacity of 3.05 billion cubic feet per day (about 1 trillion cubic feet per year). In addition to these there are over fifty proposed facilities for a total proposed capacity of 62 billion cubic feet per day (23 trillion cubic feet per year). Figure 2 shows the proposed location of these facilities (6).

As shown in Figure 1, natural gas combustion is the last stage in the natural gas lifecycle. In the US, natural gas is used for electricity generation, heating, and several industrial processes. Approximately 24% of the electricity generated comes from natural gas (1). Natural gas plants have heat rates that range from 5,800 BTU/kWh to 12,300 BTU/kWh (7).

## US Natural Gas Industry in 2003

In 2003, the total supply of natural gas in the US was over 27 trillion cubic feet. Of this, 26.5 trillion cubic feet were produced in North America (US, Canada, and Mexico), and 0.5 trillion cubic feet were imported in the form of LNG. 75% of LNG came from Trinidad and Tobago. Other exporting countries included Algeria, Malaysia, Nigeria, Qatar, and Oman (4). Table 1 shows more detailed statistics about the state of the US natural gas industry in 2003. Numbers may not add up due to rounding.

Gross Withdrawals	24,000,000
Total Dry Production	19,000,000
Total Supply	27,000,000
Total Consumption	22,500,000
Total Imports	4,000,000
Pipeline Imports	3,500,000
LNG Imports	505,000

## Table 1: 2003 Natural Gas Industry Statistics (All units in million cubic feet) (4)

#### Greenhouse gas emissions from Natural Gas produced in North America

During the late 1980's and early 1990's the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) conducted a study to determine methane emissions from the natural gas industry. This very comprehensive study developed hundreds of activity and emissions factors from all the areas of the natural industry. These factors were developed using data collected from the different sectors of the industry as well as from data collected in field measurements. Table 2 presents the percentage of produced natural gas that is emitted to the atmosphere

during the lifecycle according to the results of the previously described study, as well as the source of these emissions.

Lifecycle Segment	Emission Sources	Emissions as a Percentage of Gas Produced	
	Pneumatic Devices		
	Fugitive Emissions	0.280/	
Production	Underground Pipeline Leaks		
FIGULEION	Blow and Purge	0.3870	
	Compressor		
	Glycol Dehydrator		
	Fugitive Emissions		
Processing	Compressor	0.16%	
	Blow and Purge		
	Fugitive Emissions		
Transmission and	Blow and Purge	0.520/	
Storage	Pneumatic Devices 0.35%		
	Compressor	]	
	Underground Pipeline LeaksDistributionMeter and Pressure Stations0.35%		
Distribution			
	Costumer Meter		

# Table 2: Methane Emissions from North American Gas Life Cycle as a Percentage of Natural Gas Produced (8).

Based on the statistics presented in Table 1, 26.5 billion cubic feet of natural gas were produced in North America in 2003. Using the percentages of natural gas emitted, an average heat content of 1,030 BTU/ft<sup>3</sup>, and the assumption that 100% of the natural gas lost is methane (density 19.23 gr/ ft<sup>3</sup>) which may result in a slight overestimate of emissions given that the real percentage of methane in natural gas varies between 94% and 98%; total methane emission were calculated to develop the emission factors shown in Figure 4.

In addition to methane, carbon dioxide emissions are produced from the combustion of natural gas used during the lifecycle stages previously described. The Energy Information Administration maintains records of the amount of natural gas used during the production, processing, transmission, storage, and distribution of natural gas. This data for 2003 can be seen in Table 3. Assuming that 100% of this gas is methane, total carbon dioxide emissions were found using thermodynamic calculations. These emissions were then added to methane emissions to obtain the total emission factors shown in Figure 3.

## Table 3: Natural Gas Used During Natural Gas Life Cycle. (All units in million<br/>cubic feet) (4).

Flared Gas	98,000
Lease Fuel	760,000
Pipeline and Distribution Use	665,000
Plant Fuel	365,000

In 1993 the Natural Gas STAR program was established by the EPA to reduce methane emissions from the natural gas industry. The program is a voluntary partnership with the goal of encouraging industries to adopt practices that increase efficiency and reduce emissions. Since 1993, 338 billion cubic feet of methane have been eliminated. In 2003, 52,900 million cubic feet of methane emissions were eliminated, a 9% reduction over projected emission for that year without improved practices (9). This data was used to develop a range of emission factors for the North American natural gas industry. Figure 2 shows the total range of emission factors for the North American natural gas lifecycle. It can be seen that total lifecycle emission for natural gas produced in North America are approximately 140 lbs CO<sub>2</sub>/MMBTU, an amount dominated by combustion emissions for natural gas plants currently in operation in the US of an average 120 lbs CO<sub>2</sub>/MMBTU (10)



## Figure 2: Carbon Dioxide Equivalent Emission Factors from North American Gas Lifecycle (All Units in lbs CO<sub>2</sub>/MMBTU).

## Greenhouse gas emissions from LNG lifecycle

As shown in Figure 1, the addition of liquefied natural gas (LNG) into the North American gas system introduces three additional stages into the lifecycle of natural gas: liquefaction, tanker transport, and regasification. It is assumed that natural gas produced in other countries and imported to the US in the form of LNG produces the same emissions in the production, processing, transmission, and distribution stages of the lifecycle as if the natural gas were produced in North America. Additional emission factors needed to be developed for the three additional lifecycle stages of LNG. Tamura et-al (11) has reported emission factors for the liquefaction stage in the range of 1.32 to 3,67 gr-C/MJ. Using these results, the emission factors for liquefaction were found in units of pounds of  $CO_2$  per million BTUs, as shown in Table 4.

Liquofaction	<b>Emission Factors (lb CO<sub>2</sub>/MMBTU)</b>		
Liquelaction	Min	Average	Max
CO <sub>2</sub> from fuel combustion	11	12	13
CO <sub>2</sub> from flare combustion	0.00	0.77	1.5
CH <sub>4</sub> from vent	0.09	1.3	9.8
CO <sub>2</sub> in raw gas	0.09	4.0	6.6

**Table 4: Liquefaction Emission Factors.** 

Emissions from tanker transport of LNG were calculated using Equation 1.

$$EmissionFactor = \frac{(EF)\sum_{x} \left[ \left( 2 \times roundup \left( \frac{LNG_{x}}{TC} \right) \right) \times \frac{D_{x}}{TS} \times FC \times \frac{1}{24} \right]}{LNG_{x}}$$

**Equation 1: Tanker Emission Factor.** 

Where EF is the tanker emission factor of 3,200 kg CO<sub>2</sub>/ ton of fuel consumed; 2 is the number of trips each tanker does for every load (one bringing the LNG and one going back empty);  $LNG_x$  is the amount of natural gas (in cubic feet) brought from each country; TC is the tanker capacity in cubic feet of natural gas, assumed to be 120,000 cubic meters of LNG (1 m<sup>3</sup> LNG = 21,537 ft<sup>3</sup> NG); Dx is the distance from each country to US LNG facilities; TS is the tanker speed of 14 Knots; FC is a fuel consumption of 41 tons of fuel per day; and 24 is hours per day (12).

Exporting countries, their distances to the LNG facilities at Lake Charles, LA and Everett, MA, and the 2003 US imports can be seen in Table 5.

Exporting Country	Distance to Lake Charles Facility (nautical miles)	Distance to Everett, MA Facility (nautical miles)	2003 US Imports (million cubic feet NG)
Algeria	5,000	3,300	53,000
Australia	12,000	11,000	0
Brunei	12,000	11,000	0
Indonesia	12,000	11,000	0
Malaysia	12,000	11,000	2,700
Nigeria	6,100	5,000	50,000
Oman	8,900	7,500	8,600
Qatar	9,700	8,000	14,000
Trinidad	2,200	2,000	380,000
UAE	9,600	7,959	0
Russia	9,600	11,000	0

Table 5: LNG Exporting Countries in 2003 (4).

Emission factors for tanker transport from each country to both US facilities can be seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Tanker Emission Factors from Each Country

Since most of the LNG in 2003 was brought from Trinidad, the weighted average emission factor calculated for trips from each country to the Everett, MA facility is considered to be the a lower bound. An upper bound was obtained by assuming that all LNG was brought from Indonesia to the Lake Charles facility, and an average was obtained assuming all LNG was brought from Oman to the Lake Charles, LA facility. These resulting numbers can be seen in Table 6.

<b>Emission Factors (lb CO<sub>2</sub>/MMBTU)</b>		
Min	1.8	
Average	5.7	
Max	7.3	

**Table 6: Tanker Transport Emission Factors.** 

Regasification emissions were reported by Tamura et-al to be 0.1 gr C/ MJ (0.85 lb  $CO_2/MMBTU$ ) (11). Ruether et-al reports an emission factor of 1.6 gr  $CO_2/MJ$  (3.75 lb  $CO_2/MMBTU$ ) for this stage of the LNG lifecycle by assuming that 3% of the gas is used to run the regasification equipment (13). These values were used as the lower and upper bounds of the range of emission from regasification of LNG. Total LNG lifecycle emissions are shown in Figure 4. They range between 154 and 184 lbs  $CO_2/MMBTU$ 



Figure 4: LNG Lifecycle Emission Factors (All Units in lbs CO<sub>2</sub>/MMBTU).

## Coal Lifecycle and its Greenhouse Gas Emissions for Electricity Generation

The coal lifecycle is conceptually simpler than the natural gas lifecycle, consisting of only three steps, as shown in Figure 5.



## Figure 5: Coal Lifecycle.

In the US, 67% of the coal produced is mined in surface mines, while the remaining 33% is extracted from underground mines (1). Mined coal is then processed to remove impurities. Coal is then transported from the mines to the consumers via rail (84%), barge (11%), and trucks (5%) (14). Emissions from these lifecycle steps were calculated using the EIO-LCA tool developed at Carnegie Mellon University. In order to use this tool, economic values for each step of the lifecycle were necessary. In 1997, the year for which the EIO-LCA tool has data, the price of coal was \$18.14/ton (15). Moreover, the cost for rail transport, barge, and truck transport was \$11.06/ton, \$3.2/ton, and \$5.47/ton respectively (14). For a million tons of coal the following emission information was obtained using EIO-LCA.

Sector	Total GHG Emissions (MT CO <sub>2</sub> Equiv)
Mining	75,000
Rail Transportation	36,000
Water Transportation	3,700
Truck Transportation	5,000

Table 7: EIO-LCA Emission Data for Coal Lifecycle (16).

Using a weighted average US coal heat content of 10,266 BTU/lb (17) and the data previously discussed, it was found that the average emission factor for coal mining and transport is 11 lb CO<sub>2</sub>/MMBTU.

In 1999, the National Renewable Energy Lab published a report on lifecycle emissions for power generation from coal (18). Upstream coal emissions (including transportation) from underground mines are reported to be 15 lbs  $CO_2/MMBTU$ , while upstream coal emissions from surface mines is 9.9 lbs  $CO_2/MMBTU$ . As previously mentioned, 67% of coal is currently mines in surface mines, while 33% is mined in underground mines (1). Using this information, the current coal upstream emissions average 12 lbs  $CO_2/MMBTU$ , which is very close to the emission factor obtained using EIO-LCA. In the future, the distribution of US mines could change, affecting the average emission factor. For this reason, the range of coal upstream emissions from underground and surface mines described above is used for this paper. Moreover, the average emission factors for coal combustion at utility plants used is 205 lb  $CO_2/MMBTU$  (10).

#### **Comparing Natural Gas and Coal Lifecycle Emissions**

Emissions factors for the natural gas lifecycle and the coal lifecycle were previously reported in pounds of CO<sub>2</sub> per MMBTU of fuel. Coal and natural gas power plants have

different efficiencies; thus one million BTU of coal does not generate the same amount of electricity as one million BTU of natural gas. For this reason, emission factors must be converted to units of pounds of  $CO_2$  per kWh of electricity generated. This conversion was done using the heat rates of natural gas and coal plants. Figure 6 shows the distribution of these heat rates, and Figure 7 shows the resulting emission factor distribution for coal and natural gas. These distributions were obtained using the cumulative distribution function of EIA electricity generation data for all utility plants in 2003 (7). The minimum value represents the heat rate at which 5% of the electricity generated with the specific fuel is seen. Similarly the mean and maximum values are the heat rates at which 50% and 95% of the electricity has been generated with each fuel. As seen in Figure 6, the average heat rate for natural gas plants is lower than the average heat rate for coal plants, however the upper range of heat rates for natural gas plants surpasses the heat rates for coal plants.



Figure 6: Natural Gas and Coal Plant Heat Rates (7).



Figure 7: Emission Factors for Coal and Natural Gas Lifecycles.

Note that the average emission factor for coal combustion is higher than the emission factor for natural gas combustion. This does not change too much when the whole lifecycle is considered. More important seems to be the effect that including upstream emissions have in the range of emission factors for natural gas. While the average emission factor for the total coal lifecycle only increases by 5% compared to combustion emissions, the average emission factor for a natural gas mix with 20% LNG is 21% higher than the combustion emissions. Moreover, the maximum emission factor of the natural gas lifecycle gets closer to the minimum coal lifecycle emission factor. These results imply that if emissions at the combustion stage of the lifecycle could be controlled, natural gas would not be a much better alternative to coal in terms of greenhouse gas emissions.

#### **New Generation Capacity**

According to the DOE, by 2025 43 GW of inefficient gas and oil fired facilities will be retired, while 281 GW of new capacity will be installed (3). IGGC and NGCC power plants will probably be installed. These plants are generally more efficient than current technologies (average HHV Efficiencies are 37.5% and 50.2% respectively) (19) and thus have lower carbon emissions at the combustion stage. In addition, carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) can be performed more easily with these newer technologies. CCS is a process by which carbon emissions at the power plant are separated from other combustion products, captured and injected into underground geologic formations such as saline formations and depleted oil/gas fields. Experts believe that 90% CCS will be

technologically and economically feasible in the future. Having CCS at IGCC and NGCC plants decreases the efficiency of the plants to average HHV efficiencies of 32.4% and 42.8% respectively (19) but overall lifecycle emissions would be greatly reduced and would be essentially the same for coal and natural gas (with 20% LNG). However, the major contributor for coal emissions would be at the combustion stage, while for natural gas the majority of the emissions would come from upstream processes. Figure 8, shows total emissions with CCS for IGCC and NGCC plants using average upstream emission factors of 11.6 lbs CO<sub>2</sub> Equiv/MMBTU and 25.6 lbs CO<sub>2</sub> Equiv/MMBTU for coal and natural gas respectively



## Figure 8: Lifecycle Emission Factors for IGCC and NGCC plants w/ CCS.

#### Discussion

It has been shown that there is high uncertainty about overall lifecycle carbon emissions for coal and LNG. In the future, as newer generation technologies and CCS are installed, overall emissions from electricity generated with coal and electricity generated with natural gas could be surprisingly similar. There is push right now from power generator to increase import of LNG. They seem to hope that the price of natural gas will decrease with these imports and they will be able to recover the investment they made in natural gas plants that are currently producing under capacity. These investments should be considered sunk costs and it is important to revaluate whether investing billions of dollars in LNG infrastructure will lead us into an energy path that cannot be easily changed as it will be harder to consider these investments as sunk costs once the expected environmental benefits are not achieved. The analysis presented here only includes carbon emission, and no consideration was given to issues like energy security. Increasingly, LNG will come from areas of the world that are politically unstable. Policymakers should evaluate this increased dependence on foreign fuel before making decisions about future energy investments. In addition, the analysis presented only considers the use of natural gas for electricity generation. Natural gas is an indispensable fuel for many sectors of the US economy. As demand for natural gas from the electric utilities increases, these other sectors will probably be affected by higher natural gas prices. It is important to analyze whether these other sectors constitute a better use for natural gas than electricity generation, which has alternative fuels at its disposal.

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