

CLIMATE CHANGE

Hambach Forest: Battleground for climate action

Police are clashing with activists in Germany's Hambach Forest as energy firm RWE prepares to get at the coal beneath it. Environmentalists say more than just the future of this ancient woodland is at stake.



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Tree houses in Hambach forest set to be cleared

On Thursday morning, police moved into Germany's ancient Hambach Forest to [remove activists and the treehouses](#) they have lived in for the last six years. The forest is one of the oldest left in Europe. But underneath it lies a wealth of lignite, or brown coal — an extremely carbon-heavy fossil fuel.

Police told DW they were acting on the request of local authorities to remove the tree-dwelling activists because of fire-safety concerns. But tensions have been building in the west German forest for months, as energy company RWE [prepares to fell the trees](#) in order to expand an open-cast lignite mine.

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Over the last week, police have [clashed with activists](#) over the removal of the camp's ground-based structures. Now, the conflict has stepped up a notch, as officers dismantle the treehouses. Paul Kemen, a spokesman for police in the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, told DW on Thursday afternoon that they had begun taking down the first of the 51 treehouses. He could not say how long the clearance would take.

Kemen added that one of his colleagues had been injured that morning by protesters hurling stones. But activists insisted their protest was peaceful.



AUDIO



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Quote of the week

"I thought to myself: Can't we do something with these bottles? Who is responsible for them? Who will clean them up? I saw it as a challenge." Ismael Essome Ebode, Madiba and Nature founder, on turning bottles into boats

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Police bring armored vehicles and water cannons to the protest site in Hambach Forest

A mother of five, whose name was among a group of "pilgrims" that recently arrived at the forest to support the activists, said it broke her heart to see what was happening.

"These are peaceful people," she told DW with tears in her eyes. "I don't understand why the forest must be felled and why we continue to commit to coal."

Read more: [How far is Germany from a complete coal exit?](#)

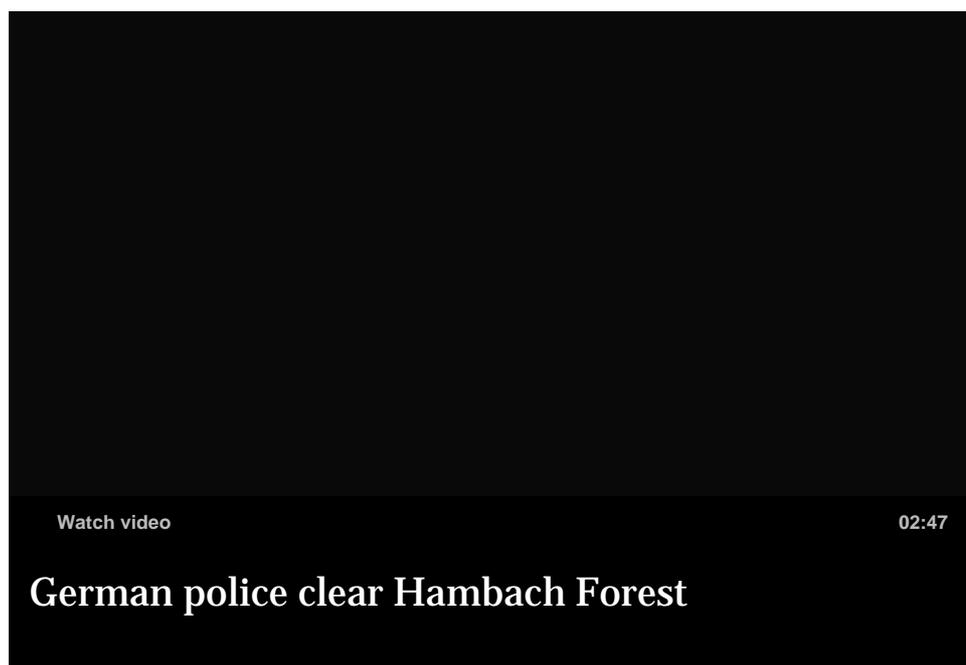
Profits over climate

Activists are calling for nationwide demonstrations on Friday and saying they expect thousands of people to join sit-ins in the forest itself. What's at stake, they say, is much more than a scrap of ancient woodland.

Ronan, an activist protesting the clearance on Thursday, said RWE was just out to maximize its profits. "They don't want to lose investors, so they want to see lignite used long into the future," he told DW.

Karolina Drzewo of anti-coal group Ende Gelände said in a statement it was "a scandal that the state government is protecting company profits and not the environment," while Greenpeace said the state government had made itself an accessory to the energy company's strategy of escalating the conflict in the forest.

Read more: [Germany's mining communities brace themselves for post-coal era](#)



Symbolic struggle

For many, the conflict over Hambach Forest is symbolic of the wider struggle for the future of the planet.

"The Hambach Forest — for us a symbol of a future-orientated society — now threatens to become a memorial for the destruction of our future," said Andreas Büttgen of Buirer für Buir, a citizens' initiative by residents of the small town of Buir, which is located close to the Hambach mine.

According to Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND), around 10 percent of the ancient forest is all that's left from logging over recent years. Neighboring villages have also been evicted to make way for the mine.

"We feel abandoned by those responsible in federal and state government — forgotten," Büttgen said.

Read more: [Tears and treehouses — the occupation in Germany's Hambach Forest](#)



Police accuse activists of throwing stones but supporters insist it has been a peaceful protest

Germany wrestles over future of coal

Germany has made developing its renewable energy capacity a national priority. But the question of when the country will finally say goodbye to coal is the [subject of fierce national debate](#), and has now been handed over to a panel of experts and politicians known as the coal commission.

It is the commission's job to weigh up climate protection against the [economic impacts of shutting down the coal sector](#) — and to devise what's being called a "socially acceptable coal exit."

Environmental groups and some members of the commission have called for the forest clearance to be put on hold until it decides on a deadline for Germany to give up coal and a plan for the economic future of mining regions.



Police have started tearing down the dozens of makeshift treehouses in the forest

Kai Niebert, head of environmental group Deutscher Naturschutzring, is a member of the commission. He says expanding the mine will make it almost impossible for Germany to reach its domestic climate

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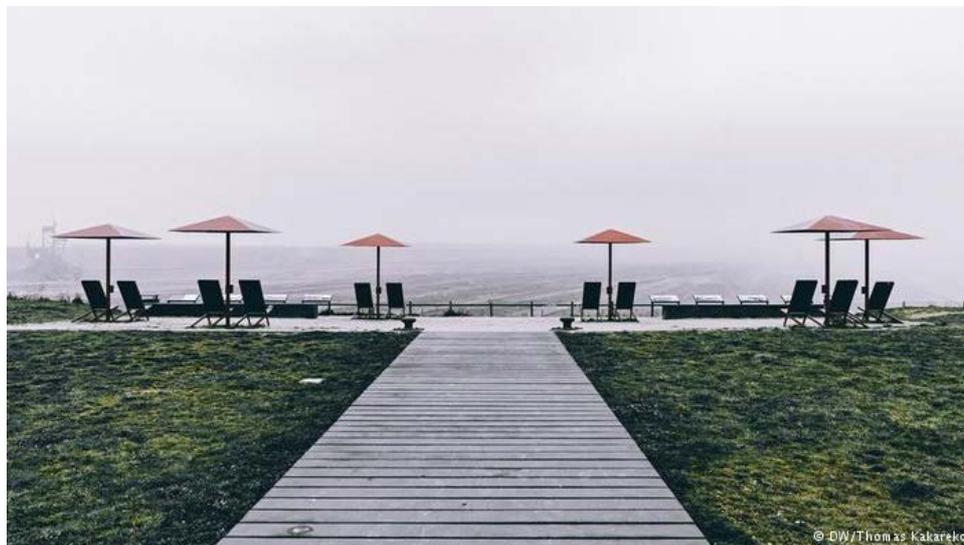
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targets, or live up to its commitments under the 2015 Paris Agreement.

"There's around 1.5 billion tons of carbon under us here in the Hambach area," Niebert said. "If it was burned, we would use up virtually all Germany's carbon budget, and that would be anything but a socially acceptable way to exit coal. It would mean all the other mines in Germany would have to close tomorrow."

Read more: [Germany's coal exit: jobs first, then the climate](#)



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Addicted to coal

The future looks bright for Germany's biggest surface coal mine. Even as the country introduces climate protection measures and switches to renewable energy sources, its dependence on coal-fueled power plants is unabated. Continued reliance on coal means Germany is unlikely to meet its 2020 emission goals. That's not good for the environment, but the view from the Hambach mine remains impressive.

Fruitless discussion

But RWE, which has extraction rights for the Hambach mine until 2040, says it has already waited too long to access the coal beneath the ancient forest. Earlier this week, the utility met with activists and offered a possible suspension of the forest clearance until December, but insisted the trees would be felled before the winter season was through.

The utility said that as activists rejected its offer, it planned to proceed in mid-October, arguing that the deforestation was "necessary to maintain open-cast mining operations and coal extraction over the next two years." It added that the coal commission's work didn't justify a suspension of the clearance because its findings "will deal with the medium- and long-term prospects for coal-fired power generation."

On Wednesday, Environment Minister Svenja Schulze told the German parliament: "One side should take its hands off the chainsaw and the other should come down from the trees and open up to a political discussion. We need joint discussion here."

The federal government has not yet intervened.

DW RECOMMENDS

» **Tears and tree houses: The occupation in Germany's Hambach Forest**

The trees may soon have to give way to a coal mine expansion. But activists are building tree houses and blocking roads. DW spent three days in the ancient forest with them. (30.11.2017) 

» **German state begins clearing out Hambach Forest treehouses**

Activists have lived in the trees for the past six years as part of a protest to protect the forest from coal mining. But now the authorities have said the treehouses violate building codes and are a fire hazard. (13.09.2018)

» **The battle for villages and forests in Germany's coal country**

In August, thousands of activists will take part in anti-coal demonstrations in western Germany, as mines and plants continue to operate and expand. DW looks at the impact of coal mining on people and nature there. (08.08.2017)

» **Germany's coal exit: jobs first, then the climate**

Germany's "coal commission" is starting to plan how the country is to give up coal mining. But it's already under fire for prioritizing the economy over the environment. (26.06.2018)

» **Rallies in Germany against government's continued reliance on coal**

Demonstrations took place in at least five cities, including Berlin and Hamburg. The protests come two days before a government commission intended to map a national path away from coal is to convene for the first time. (24.06.2018)

» **Germany's mining communities brace themselves for post-coal era**

The coal industry is the biggest employer in some regions of Germany. In the east German city of Zeitz, people fear for their jobs and demand concrete plans for their future once the climate-killing fuel is phased out. (01.06.2018) 

» **The end of an era: hard coal in Germany**

200 years of coal mining have certainly left their mark on Europe. As Germany prepares for the closure of its last two hard coal mines, an exhibition in Essen takes a look back at the "Age of Coal." (26.04.2018) 

» **You won't stop climate change on your own — demand action!**

Most of us do things every day that contribute to climate change, and changing our behavior is vital. But we won't get anywhere acting alone. And that's where you come in. (22.12.2017)

» **How far is Germany from a complete coal exit?**

Although Germany has ambitious plans to reduce CO2 emissions over the upcoming decades, a total phase-out of the country's main climate culprit still seems far off. A report from Germany's biggest coal battleground. (03.04.2017) 

 **Climate savior or sinner — how green is Germany's energy production?**

While Germany struggles to reach its emission goals, coal continues to generate around 40 percent of the country's electricity. Instagrammer @thomas_k explores his home country's biggest climate sin, and examines some solutions. (15.11.2017) 

 **6 years of coal protest coming to an end at Germany's Hambach forest?**

Activists have uprooted their lives to save a German forest from being sacrificed to a gigantic coal mine. Now, German police are overseeing the clearing of the Hambach forest as the plans for mining go ahead. (06.09.2018) 

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 **Tree houses in Hambach forest set to be cleared**  **German police clear Hambach Forest**  **#DailyDrone: Hambach surface mine** 

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Living Planet: Hambach — Germany's coal stand-off

13.09.2018

For the last six years, activists have been living amongst the trees of Germany's Hambach Forest in a bid to stop energy company RWE from mining the land for brown coal. Plans to clear the area have already been approved and police are enforcing the eviction of protesters. The DW Environment team went to find out more about what this means for fossil fuels in Germany.



6 years of coal protest coming to an end at Germany's Hambach forest?

06.09.2018

Activists have uprooted their lives to save a German forest from being sacrificed to a gigantic coal mine. Now, German police are overseeing the clearing of the Hambach forest as the plans for mining go ahead.



Tree houses in Hambach forest set to be cleared

13.09.2018

Police in western Germany have started removing dozens of environmental activists from a forest that's to be cleared for coal mining. The activists have been living in some 60 treehouses, in an effort to prevent the forest's destruction.

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