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UK Gas Imports Climb Sharply as North Sea Output Declines

July 31, 2025
— Categories: Breaking News

Britain's reliance on foreign gas is growing as domestic production in the North Sea continues to shrink. Government data released this week shows that gas imports rose by 20% between January and March, while North Sea output dropped by 6.9% a decline linked to the halt in new drilling and increased taxation on the sector.

According to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ), demand for gas surged by 8.5% over the same period, largely driven by cold weather and the increased need for gas-fired power generation to compensate for low wind speeds. This has left many energy experts warning of a widening gap between supply and demand, with Britain turning increasingly to imported fuel.

The decision to stop issuing new licences for North Sea oil and gas exploration, announced as part of broader environmental targets, has sparked concern across the energy industry. Offshore Energies UK (OEUK), which represents the UK's offshore oil and gas sector, has repeatedly stressed the importance of maintaining domestic production to ensure long-term energy security.

Mike Tholen, strategy director at OEUK, commented: "The UK needs a diverse energy system which offers multiple choices. Wind will provide an increasing share of the mix but intermittency will remain an issue for which gas power generation will provide back-up."

Compounding the problem, wind energy generation fell by 13% during the first quarter due to historically low wind speeds. The DESNZ confirmed that wind accounted for just 28.5% of total energy generation, down from 38.1% the year before. In contrast, gas-fired power plants produced a greater share of electricity during this period to stabilise the national grid.

Richard Tice, energy spokesman for Reform UK, said: "Despite extra wind power investment and billions more in subsidies, wind generation fell 13% over winter. Plus, government policy meant we produced less gas from the North Sea so imports surged. This is the economics of a madhouse."

Much of the imported gas came from Norway via an undersea pipeline, with additional liquefied natural gas (LNG) arriving from the United States and Qatar. Experts have warned that this increased dependence on global markets could leave the UK exposed to volatile pricing and geopolitical risks.

Claire Coutinho, Shadow Secretary of State for Energy Security, criticised the decision to restrict new exploration, stating: "Labour's plans to shut down the North Sea when we're going to need gas for decades is sheer economic insanity. No other country is doing this. It will only make us more reliant on foreign imports."

Industry projections suggest that approximately 180 of the UK's 280 offshore oil and gas fields will shut down by 2030, in part due to the current windfall tax policy and the ongoing pause on new exploration licences.

Nevertheless, some voices continue to advocate for a transition away from fossil fuels. Barnaby Wharton of RenewableUK said: “There is no one who credibly believes we could meet the UK’s electricity needs by burning the gas that’s left in the North Sea. We successfully drilled nearly all of our North Sea oil and gas in the boom years of the 80s and 90s. Now we need to capitalise on our world-leading wind resources or we are going to end up importing billions of pounds of foreign gas to keep the lights on.”

An Energy Department spokesperson stated: “We are delivering the most significant investment in clean power in British history, as part of our mission to replace our dependence on volatile fossil fuel markets with home-grown power we control.”

As Britain navigates the balance between environmental goals and energy security, the planned shift away from domestic fossil fuel production has ignited a debate over how best to maintain stable, affordable, and sovereign energy supplies in the years ahead.