Analysis: TransAlta Centralia Coal Plant Wasn't Running During Supposed "Emergency" Period

In December 2025, the U.S. Department of Energy **issued an emergency order** forcing the TransAlta coal plant in Centralia – Washington state's last remaining coal plant – to stay online 90 days past its retirement date until March 16. In issuing the order, DOE stated Centralia's continued operation "is essential for grid stability in the Northwest." However, **data from the Energy Information Administration shows that the plant was not running during this emergency period.**

Background

The more than 50-year-old facility is Washington's largest single source of greenhouse gases and nitrogen oxide pollution.

The planned retirement of the TransAlta Centralia Power Plant has been anticipated for more than 15 years. In 2011, the State of Washington and TransAlta reached an agreement to phase out coal generation at the facility. As part of this transition, in December 2025 TransAlta announced a proposal to convert Centralia's Unit 2 from coal-fired generation to natural gas.

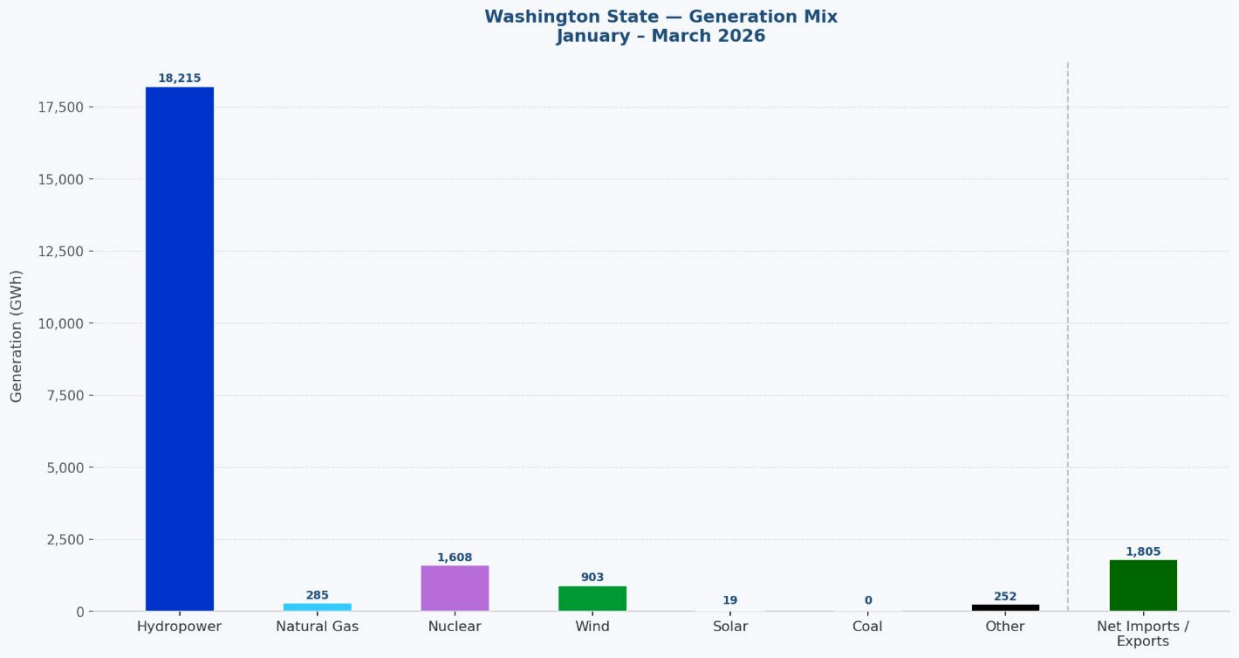
Electricity Generation Over the 90 Day Period

Environmental Defense Fund analyzed electricity generation in Washington and across the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) Northwest region using hourly balancing authority data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration Form 930 dataset, covering **January 1 through March 6, 2026.** DOE cited NERC's winter reliability assessment for the Northwest region in support of its emergency order issued in December.

The NERC Northwest region consists of 14 balancing authorities. The TransAlta Centralia plant is the only coal facility within the Gridforce Energy Management, LLC (GRID) balancing authority. As a result, coal generation reported for the GRID balancing authority reflects output from the Centralia plant.

During the analysis period, the Centralia plant generated only **0.008 GWh of coal-fired electricity (Figure 1)** – **effectively negligible and consistent with minimal operations to maintain plant readiness**. In comparison, hydropower facilities in Washington produced more than **18,000 GWh** over the same timeframe.

Figure 1: Estimated Generation by Source: Washington State[1]



In the broader NERC Northwest region, **hydropower met approximately 70% of total electricity load (Figure 2)**. The small amount of coal output – roughly 3% of total generation – is from the Colstrip Montana plant. Natural gas and wind power provided 15% and 8% of total generation respectively.

During a short period between Feb 12 –14, the region net imported small amounts of electricity, coinciding with Washington's only nuclear plant unexpectedly shutting down. According to the Bonneville Power Administration, which markets the nuclear plant's power, it leveraged its hydropower capacity and flexibility to meet electricity demand.

[1] Washington State generation shares are derived from the hourly data for the balancing authorities that serve the state.

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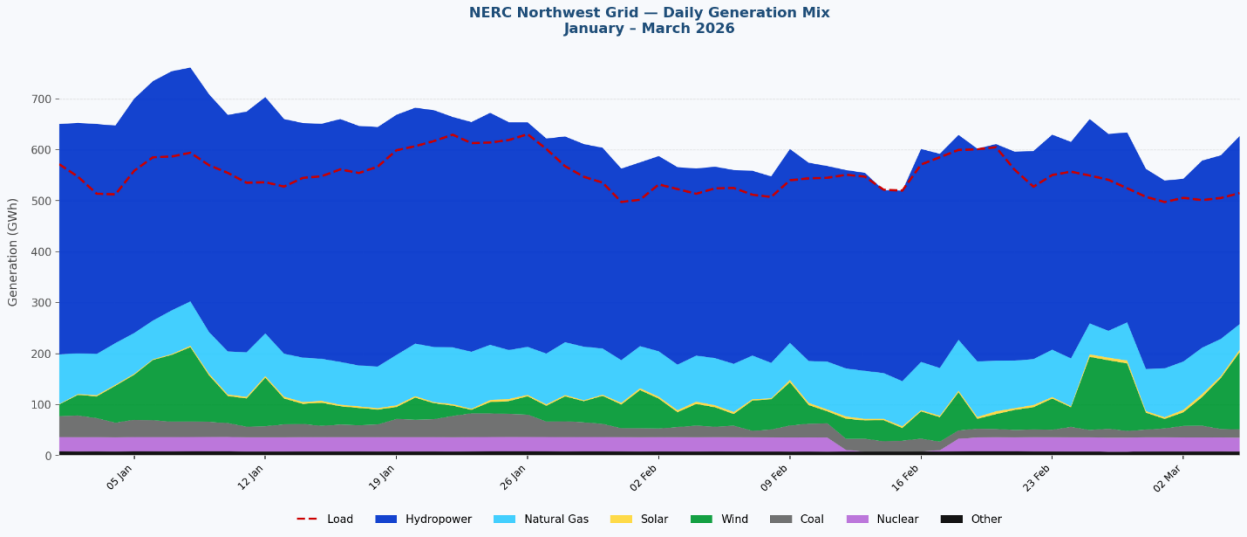
Figure 2: Electricity Generation by Source: Broader NERC Northwest Region



Conclusion

Despite claims from the Department of Energy that the Centralia coal plant's continued operation was essential to "grid reliability," the plant was not in fact running over the supposed emergency period. Data from EIA confirms that **Centralia produced virtually zero output – just enough to keep the plant operational.**

The vast majority of electricity generation in the NERC Northwest region was provided by hydropower.

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