

## **Winter Blackout Fears in Kyrgyzstan**

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When reservoir levels fall, so does hydropower generation – bad news for consumers at peak usage time.

Officials in Kyrgyzstan are warning of power cuts over the coming winter because of low water levels behind the reservoir dams used to generate hydroelectricity.

The situation is similar to autumn 2014, when the major Toktogul reservoir was only 60 per cent full. The government managed to secure additional electricity supplies from neighbouring Kazakhstan, averting the winter power cuts that have been a feature of life in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. But the higher price of imported power was passed on to consumers.

Some experts believe that the reason why reservoir levels fall in the autumn is not just because of low rainfall. Instead, they suspect that too much water is being let out through the dams over the summer. A healthy flow of water over the growing season benefits farmers in neighbouring Uzbekistan, located downstream of Toktogul on the Syr Darya.

There are suspicions that hydroelectric station managers receive payment in return for opening the sluices in summer. Prime Minister Temir Sariev has promised to crack down on power industry officials involved in this kind of corruption.

The tension between providing Uzbek agriculture with adequate irrigation in spring and summer, and storing up water to generate cheap electricity for domestic consumption in winter, exemplifies Central Asia's water problems. Two mountainous states – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – can control upstream water flows to generate much-needed hydroelectricity, since they have no oil or gas. Hydrocarbon fuel producers Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan need water to irrigate their crops, and do not regard it as a commodity that they need to pay for.

Kyrgyzstan's deputy minister of energy and industry, Nurlan Sadykov, insists that reservoir levels are higher than they were this time last year, thanks to more rigorous management and scrutiny.

Energy expert Sapar Argynbaev doubts that the water level is high enough to allow Kyrgyzstan to escape blackouts if the winter proves a harsh one and power consumption is high. The authorities have also arranged for Tajikistan to supply a limited amount of electricity.

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