

Electricity Price Outlook for April 2017

By John Howley
Senior Economist

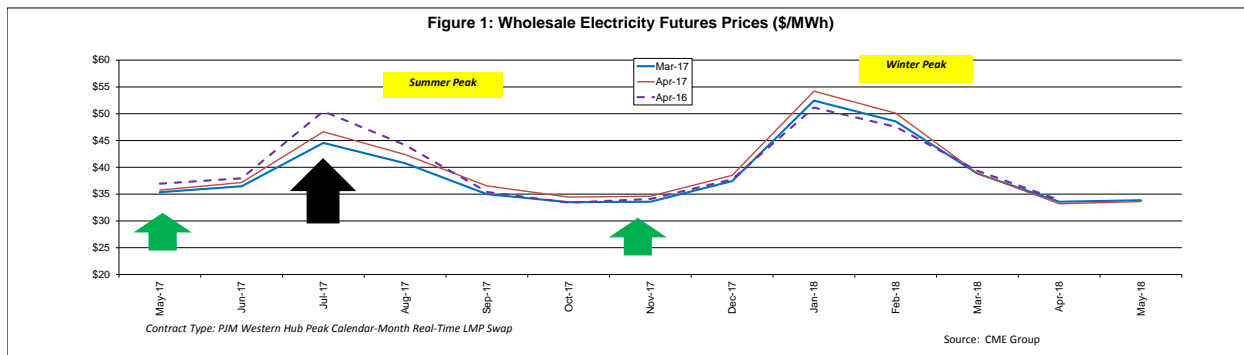
Office of Technical and Regulatory Analysis District of Columbia Public Service Commission

The Office of Technical and Regulatory Analysis presents the outlook for wholesale electricity prices each month. This assessment considers trends in electricity futures markets as well as forecasted weather, economic growth, and input fuel prices.

Wholesale Electricity Futures Market

Contracts to deliver electricity in future months are traded for the multi-state region that is served by regional transmission operator PJM Interconnection and includes the District of Columbia. Figure 1 below shows the futures contract “price strips” through May 2018 as settled on March 7, 2017 (blue line), and on April 20, 2017 (red line).

Because electricity cannot be easily stored, the effect of seasonal temperature changes on the price of future delivery contracts stands out sharply, with yearly peaks in the hot summer months and cold winter ones. Wholesale prices rise to incentivize high-cost generators to turn on their power plants to meet the high demand for electricity to run air conditioning on hot summer days and heating systems on cold winter days.

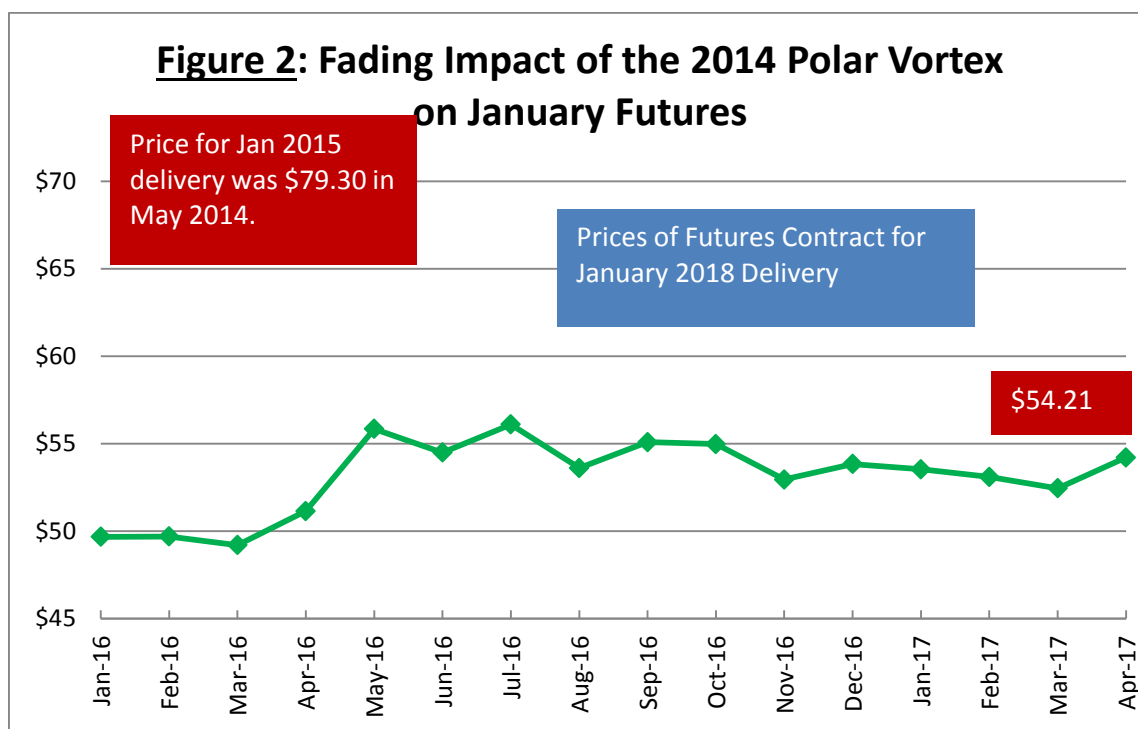


In Figure 1 above, the dashed purple line shows the trading values for the “price strip” from one year ago (April 18, 2016).¹ Price expectations for the summer months are below last year’s levels. However, investor expectations of future electricity prices during the winter months of the coming year have risen since last month (blue line) and since last year (dashed purple line). Price expectations for the summer months are below last year’s levels.

¹ See PJM Western Hub Peak Calendar-Month Real-Time LMP Swap Futures; CME Group.

Price expectations during the “shoulder months” remain close to where they were a year ago. The **green arrows** (see Figure 1 above) point to the “shoulder months” of May 2017 and November 2017. During these months, temperatures are moderate and demand can be met from less expensive generation like nuclear and wind.

The **green line** in Figure 2 (below) illustrates how investors have responded to the unusually cold winter weather experienced during the “Polar Vortex” of January 2014 -- and the February 2015 cold snap -- as they form expectations about the price of electricity in coming winter months. In May 2014, the price of a MWh for delivery in January 2015 closed at \$79.30. Investors’ fears about the risk of January generation outages seem to be moderating and have returned to pre-Polar Vortex levels.² The most recent price for January 2018 delivery is \$54.21 – an increase of 3.4 percent from the previous month. As can be seen in Figure 1 (above) the trend of January prices exceeding July prices continues.



Behind these price movements are the extraordinary demands for electricity during January 2014 when eight of the 10 highest winter demands for electricity ever recorded in the PJM region occurred. PJM set a new, all-time winter peak demand of 141,312 megawatts during the evening of January 7, 2014.³ PJM reports that these January 2014 cold-weather events

² The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission held a hearing about the January 2014 cold snap. The FERC Staff presentation can be found at this link: <http://ferc.gov/legal/staff-reports/2014/04-01-14.pdf>.

³ PJM’s previous, all-time winter peak demand was 136,675 MW, on February 5, 2007. PJM GRID MEETS MONTH-LONG CHALLENGES OF COLD JANUARY; January 31, 2014; <http://pjm.com/~media/about-pjm/newsroom/2014-releases/20140131-pjm-grid-meets-month-long-challenges.ashx>.

resulted in an unusually high level of “forced outages” of generators serving the PJM system; this created a “shortage effect” that drove wholesale prices temporarily higher.⁴

On February 20, 2015, PJM set another new peak for winter demand -- 143,826 MW -- when PJM’s “forced outage” rate peaked at 13.3 percent. It is notable that this reduced rate of forced outage is well below the “forced outage” rate of 22.2 percent experienced by PJM generators on January 7, 2014.⁵ This shows that PJM has learned some lessons since the “Polar Vortex.” Investor anxiety about PJM’s capacity to meet extreme demand in the future seems to have largely abated.

Retail Residential Electricity Prices

The U.S. Energy Information Administration’s (EIA) *Short-Term Energy Outlook (STEO)* reports that retail residential electricity prices are expected to increase by 2.5 percent in 2017 nationwide and a 2.4 percent increase is projected in 2018.⁶ Factors other than generation costs play a role, including the need for continued investment in transmission and distribution infrastructure.

On March 1, 2017, the Public Service Commission of the District of Columbia approved the results of the annual competitive auction for new electric generation rates for default service, called Standard Offer Service or SOS, which will go into effect on June 1, 2017. As a result of a competitive auction overseen by the Commission, the price to compare (generation plus transmission) for a residential standard SOS customer will decrease on average by about \$1.10 per month for the average user of 659 kWh/month. The residential standard SOS customer’s summer price to compare rate will decrease from 8.0 cents per kWh to 7.6 cents per kWh while their winter rate will stay at 8.2 cents per kWh. On average, the price to compare for small commercial SOS customers will decrease about \$0.07 per month for the average user of 2,061 kWh/month. Overall, residential standard SOS customers will face an average bill decrease of 1.3 percent, while small commercial customers will face an average bill decrease of 0.03 percent.⁷

The following sections provide a brief discussion of some of the factors affecting this month’s outlook, including the three-month weather forecast, the overall economic outlook, and the prices of fuels used in power generation.

Weather Outlook

Sea-surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean influence weather patterns across North America; these so-called *La Niña/El Niño* conditions are the primary factor in the three-month temperature outlook which, in turn, impacts investor expectations about future electricity prices.

⁴ See PJM; “Generation Forced Outages for January 6-8, 2014”; <http://www.pjm.com/~media/documents/reports/20140109-january-2014-cold-weather-peaks-and-generator-outages.ashx>.

⁵ *PJM weathered 2015 winter demand better than 2014: staff*; Platts; 20 April 2015; <http://www.platts.com/latest-news/electric-power/houston/pjm-weathered-2015-winter-demand-better-than-21320423>.

⁶ *April 2017 Short-Term Energy Outlook (STEO)*; Table 7c; <http://205.254.135.24/forecasts/steo/>.

⁷ Formal Case No. 1017; Order No. 18713; March, 2017.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s April 13th *El Niño* watch indicates that ENSO-neutral conditions are favored to continue through at least spring 2017, with increasing chances for El Niño development by late summer and fall.⁸ NOAA notes that, with ENSO-neutral conditions continuing for the present, above-normal temperatures are expected in the mid-Atlantic region through the May-June-July period.⁹

EIA reports that heating degree days in our region are projected to be about 14 percent higher in 2018 than in 2017. 2017 – like 2016 -- was unusually warm which depressed heating-degree days during those years.¹⁰

Cooling-degree days measure the demand for air conditioning. EIA projects cooling-degree days in the Census region that includes the District of Columbia will be 9 percent lower in 2017 than in 2016, with a projected 4 percent decline in 2018. The projection for summer 2017 is slightly above the 10-year average.¹¹ The long-term warming trend continues.¹²

Economic Growth and Electricity Consumption

The outlook for economic activity in 2017 remains one of moderate growth. Real (inflation-adjusted) gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to increase and to continue bringing down the unemployment rate gradually. The EIA reports a real GDP growth rate of 1.6 percent for 2016. Real GDP is projected to grow by 2.3 percent in 2017 and 2.5 percent in 2018.¹³ Slow economic growth depresses the growth of electricity sales and moderates prices of generation fuels.

EIA forecasts that residential electricity sales (measured in kWh) will decrease slightly in 2017. Nationwide electricity sales for all sectors will increase by 0.5 percent in 2017.¹⁴

Fuel Prices

In recent years, the cost of fuels for electricity generation has been restrained, with the exception of petroleum-based fuels where the market remains volatile in both directions. This moderate trend is driven by historically low natural gas prices and moderate economic growth. The cost of natural gas for generation is projected to remain below the \$4 level in 2017.¹⁵

⁸ http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/enso_advisory/ensodisc.html. “ENSO” means *El Niño* Southern Oscillation; “ENSO-neutral” means that neither *El Niño* nor *La Niña* conditions are present.

⁹ <http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/predictions/90day/fxus05.html>.

¹⁰ *STEO*, Table 9c.

¹¹ *STEO*; Table 9c.

¹² NOAA National Climatic Data Center; Contiguous U.S. Temperature 1896 – 2016; https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/cag/time-series/us/110/0/tavg/1/2/1895-2017?trend=true&trend_base=100&firsttrendyear=1895&lasttrendyear=2017.

¹³ *STEO*; Table 1.

¹⁴ *STEO*; Table 7b.

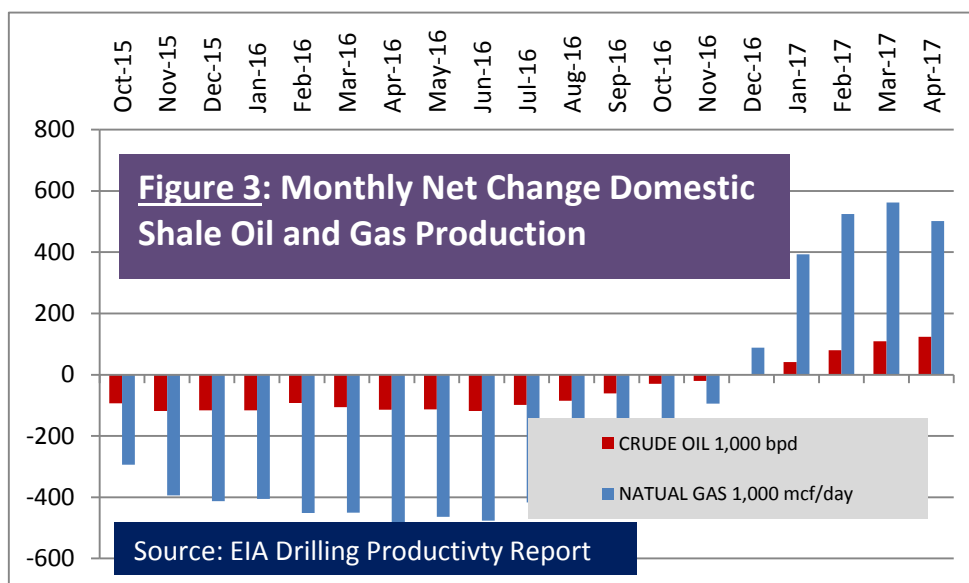
¹⁵ *STEO*, Table 7a.

Petroleum

The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries announced coordinated output reductions at their November 30 meeting; several non-OPEC producers pledged to join the price-support effort. North Sea Brent crude averaged \$52 per barrel in March, a \$3 decrease from February. For the moment, OPEC has appears to have succeeded in stabilizing Brent above \$50 per barrel. Brent crude is forecast to average \$54 per barrel in 2017 and \$57 per barrel in 2018.¹⁶

Industry observers expect domestic shale oil producers to raise their production if OPEC cuts sustain the price above \$50 per barrel. EIA projects that domestic crude oil production will average 9.2 million barrels per day (b/d) in 2017 and 9.7 million b/d in 2018 – up from 8.9 million b/d in 2016. If these forecasts hold up, it would mark a return to the peak of 9.7 million b/d in April 2015 which was the highest monthly output since April 1971.¹⁷

Domestic crude oil output continues to show signs of recovery. The Wall Street Journal reports that domestic shale-drilling companies have significantly increased their budgets for 2017.¹⁸ The latest *Monthly Drilling Report* from the EIA shows oil and natural gas output increasing in the U.S. shale-producing basins surveyed (see Figure 3).¹⁹



Net liquid fuel imports to the United States peaked at over 60 percent of domestic supply in 2005 and then fell to 24 percent in 2015 – the lowest level since 1970; this represents a major shift in the structure of world oil markets.²⁰ EIA projects the import share to fall to 17 percent in 2018.²¹ See Figure 4 below.

¹⁶ STEO, page 1. The “North Sea Brent Crude” is the key contract for setting the price of crude oil in international markets.

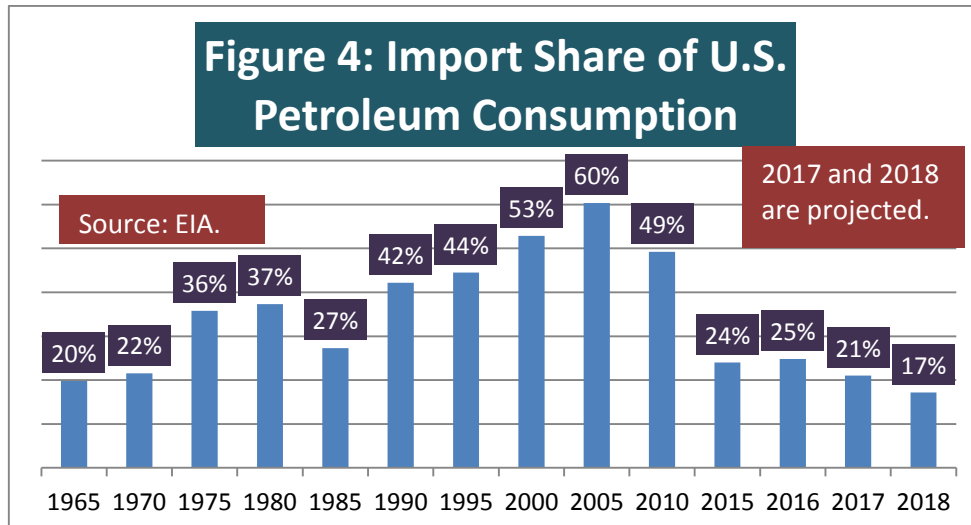
¹⁷ STEO, Table 4a.

¹⁸ “Big Oil Firms Save While Upstarts Spend,” *Wall Street Journal*; January 30, 2017.

¹⁹ See EIA’s monthly *Drilling Productivity Report*; <http://www.eia.gov/petroleum/drilling/pdf/dpr-full.pdf>.

²⁰ EIA *Monthly Energy Report*; June 2016; Table 3.1; page 49; <http://www.eia.gov/totalenergy/data/monthly/pdf/mer.pdf>. STEO; Table 4a.

²¹ STEO, Table 4a.



For the 2017 summer driving season (April to September), EIA forecasts an average price for regular gasoline of \$2.46 per gallon, compared with \$2.23 for last summer.²² EIA forecasts that gasoline prices will average \$2.39 for all of 2017 and \$2.44 in 2018.²³

Based on recent data, petroleum supply and demand appear well balanced, supporting expectations of stable prices for 2017. EIA reports that Iranian oil production is increasing in the wake of the international agreement to lift economic sanctions on that country; Libyan output is also increasing.²⁴

Petroleum fuels made up 0.2 percent of the PJM fuel mix during the twelve months ending in March 2017.²⁵ (See Figure 5 below.)

Natural Gas

Natural gas prices are significantly below 2008 levels when the Henry Hub price averaged \$8.94 per one million British Thermal Units (MMBtu).²⁶ Recently, the spot price has recovered from the lows reached in early 2012 when it briefly touched \$2 per MMBtu.

Natural gas prices in the spot market result from the interaction of trends in domestic production, growing gas-fired generation, and winter heating needs.

Henry Hub spot prices settled at \$3.33/MMBtu on April 6, an increase of 53 cents/MMBtu from March 1. The Henry Hub natural gas spot price averaged \$2.88/MMBtu in March, more than \$1 higher than the average of \$1.73/MMBtu in March 2016.²⁷ Starting from

²² STEO; page 1.

²³ STEO; page 1 and Table 4c.

²⁴ STEO, Tables 3b and 3c.

²⁵ See PJM System Mix by Fuel; <https://gats.pjm-eis.com/gats2/PublicReports/PJMSystemMix/Filter>.

²⁶ EIA; *2011 Annual Energy Outlook*; page 115.

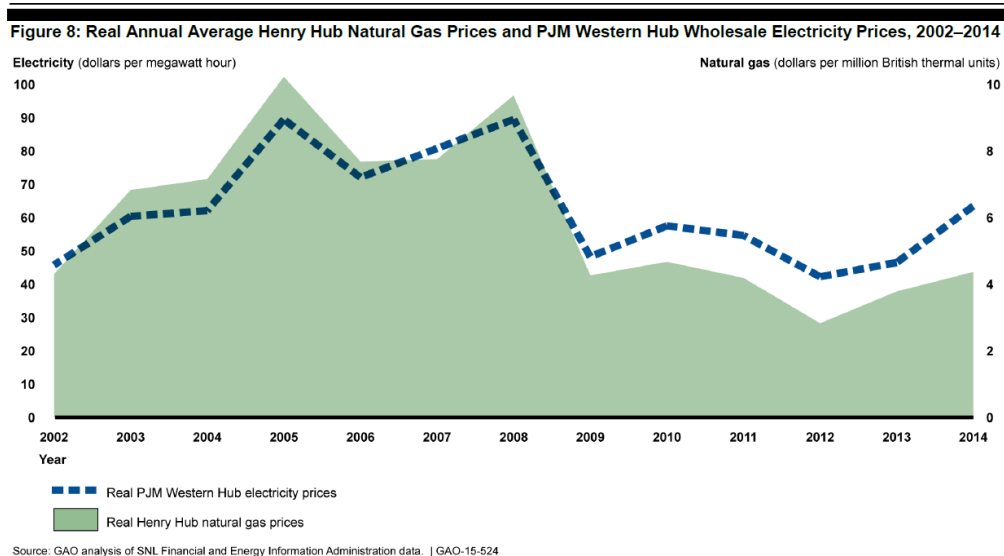
²⁷ STEO; page 8. “Henry Hub” refers to a distribution hub on the natural gas pipeline system in Erath, Louisiana. It is used as the pricing point for natural gas futures contracts traded on the New York Mercantile Exchange.

the historical average of \$2.60/MMBtu in 2016, EIA projects \$3.20 for 2017 and \$3.57 for 2018.²⁸

The Henry Hub spot price is more volatile than the cost of natural gas actually paid by electricity generators where long-term contracts and hedging are typically involved. EIA projects that the cost of natural gas for power generation will increase by 25 percent in 2017 followed by an increase of 11 percent in 2018.²⁹

U.S. liquefied natural gas (LNG) export capacity is growing. Sabine Pass LNG (Texas) began export operations in February 2016; Cove Point LNG (Maryland) is expected to come on line this year. Natural gas liquefaction capacity from all projects currently under construction is projected to expand by 1.4 Bcf/d in 2017, 1.9 Bcf/d in 2018, and 3.8 Bcf/d in 2019.³⁰ EIA expects exports to grow faster than production, which supports rising natural-gas prices.

Although natural gas fuels just over one quarter of total generation in PJM, it has a dominating influence on wholesale electricity price in the PJM market as shown by “Figure 8” below.³¹



Wholesale electricity prices declined in 2016 under the impact of lower natural gas prices. The PJM Market Monitor reports that:

PJM day-ahead energy market prices decreased in 2016 compared to 2015. The load-weighted average day-ahead LMP was 19.2 percent lower in 2016 than in 2015, \$29.68 per MWh versus \$36.73 per MWh. PJM day-ahead load-weighted energy market prices were lower in 2016 than at any time in

²⁸ STEO, Table 5b.

²⁹ STEO; Table 7a.

³⁰ See <https://www.eia.gov/naturalgas/weekly/#jfm-trends>. “Bcf/d” is billion cubic feet per day.

³¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office; *Electricity: Generation Mix has Shifted, and Growth in Consumption has Slowed, Affecting System Operations and Prices*; GAO-15-524; May 2015; page 33; <http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/670545.pdf>.

PJM history since the introduction of the PJM Day-Ahead Energy Market in June 2000.³²

Natural gas accounted for 26.2 percent of the PJM fuel mix during the twelve months ending in March 2017, a significant increase from 16.4 percent in June 2014.³³ (See Figure 5 below.)

Coal

Coal has been displaced by natural gas, wind, and nuclear in electricity generation. Nationwide, coal consumption in electric power generation has not returned to the peak level of 2007. EIA estimates that coal production declined by 158 million short tons (MMst) in 2016 to 739 MMst, the lowest level since 1978; this is the largest annual decline since 1949. However, EIA expects that higher natural gas prices will produce a 4 percent rebound in coal production in 2017 followed by an additional 2 percent increase in 2018.³⁴

EIA reports that the delivered price of coal for power generation peaked at \$2.39 in 2011. EIA estimates the delivered price of coal averaged \$2.11 per MMBtu in 2016 and forecasts \$2.17 per MMBtu in 2017 and \$2.22 in 2018.³⁵

In the PJM wholesale market that serves the District of Columbia, the cost of natural gas is a more important factor than coal in setting the overall level of wholesale market prices for electricity.³⁶ (See “Figure 8” above.) Coal represented 34.6 percent of the PJM fuel mix during the twelve months ending in March 2017, down from a recent high of 45.2 percent in June 2014.³⁷ As noted above, the natural gas share of PJM generation is rising, in line with national trends. Furthermore, coal remains “tied” with nuclear as a share of the PJM fuel mix. (See Figure 5 below.)

³² Monitoring Analytics; 2016 State of the Market Report for PJM; page 22.
http://www.monitoringanalytics.com/reports/PJM_State_of_the_Market/2016/som-pjm-volume1.pdf.

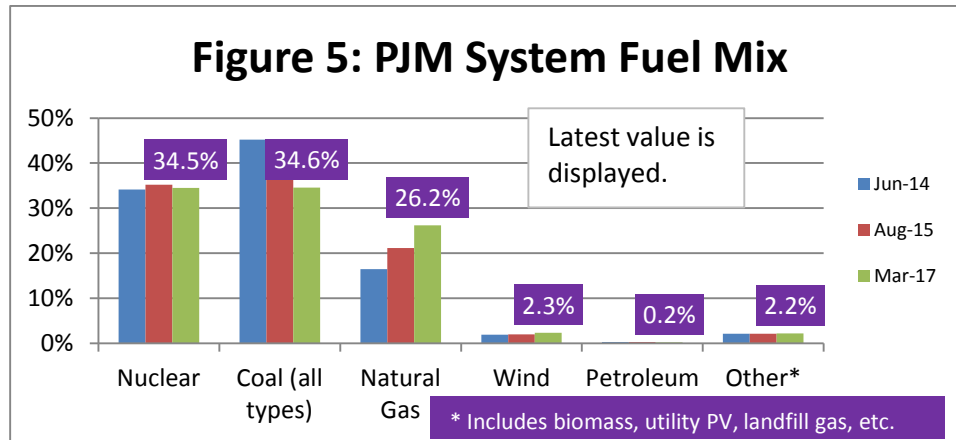
³³ See PJM.

³⁴ *STEO*; page 2. Historical data can be found at http://www.eia.gov/totalenergy/data/annual/pdf/sec7_9.pdf. See also The Brattle Group; Coal Plant Retirements: Feedback Effects on Wholesale Electricity Prices; November 2013; http://www.brattle.com/system/news/pdfs/000/000/584/original/Coal_Plant_Retirements_-_Feedback_Effects_on_Wholesale_Electricity_Prices.pdf.

³⁵ *STEO*; Table 7a.

³⁶ EIA reports prices for coal as delivered under long-term contracts that are less volatile than the spot prices reported for other fossil fuels. See Table 6, *STEO*.

³⁷ See PJM.



Across the United States, coal generation plants are being retired and new natural gas-fired generation plants are being built, mirroring trends in the PJM region. On an annual basis, EIA projects that the 2016 natural gas share (34.0 percent) of electricity generation nationwide will fall to 32 percent in 2017 and 2018.³⁸ EIA’s forecasted generation shares for coal and natural gas is very sensitive to the natural-gas price forecast.

Renewables

Utility-scale solar still accounts for less than 0.1 percent of installed capacity on the PJM system; however, it is growing at a rapid pace. During 2016, this capacity grew from 128 MW on January 1 to 262.3 MW by December 31.³⁹ This represents a growth rate of 105 percent for a single year. For comparison, wind represents 0.6 percent of PJM installed capacity and grew by 12 percent during 2016.

PJM now monitors the output of utility-scale solar. Solar output varies by the time of day and day of the year, as is shown in the chart below.⁴⁰ There are currently no indications of a sustained impact by renewables on price formation in the PJM wholesale market but continued rapid growth may change that in the future.

EIA reports that solar capacity is growing rapidly nationwide, with utility-scale solar expected to grow by 44 percent from 2016 to 2018. At that rate, utility-scale solar will be more than one percent of electricity generation capacity in 2018.⁴¹

³⁸ STEO; page 2.

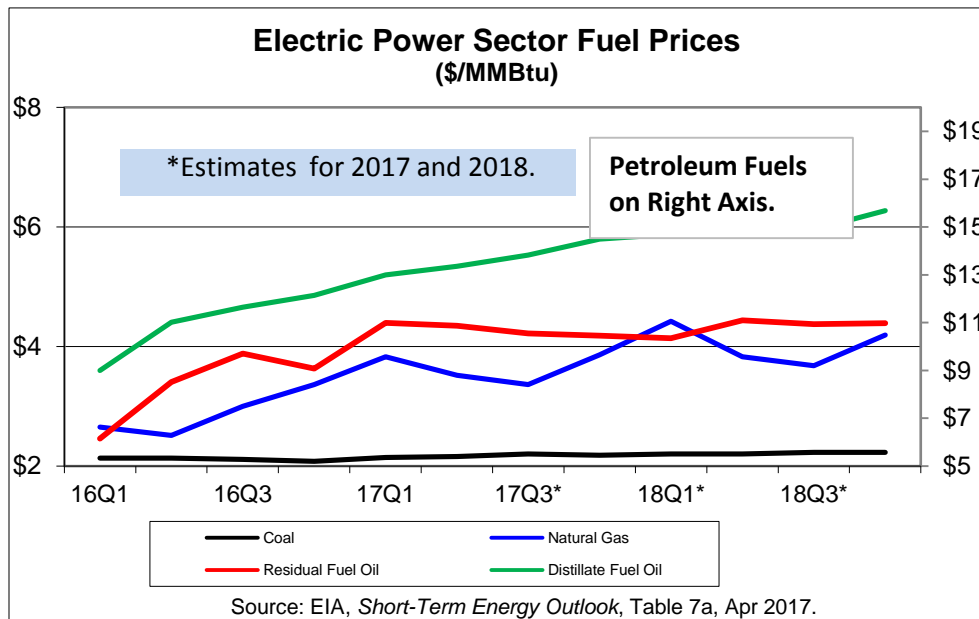
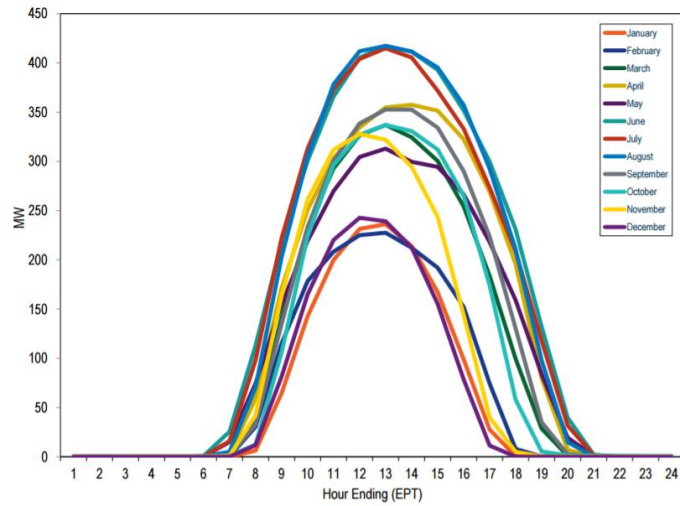
³⁹ IMM 2016 State of the Market Report; page 33.

⁴⁰ PJM Market Monitoring State of the Market 2016; Volume I; page 48;

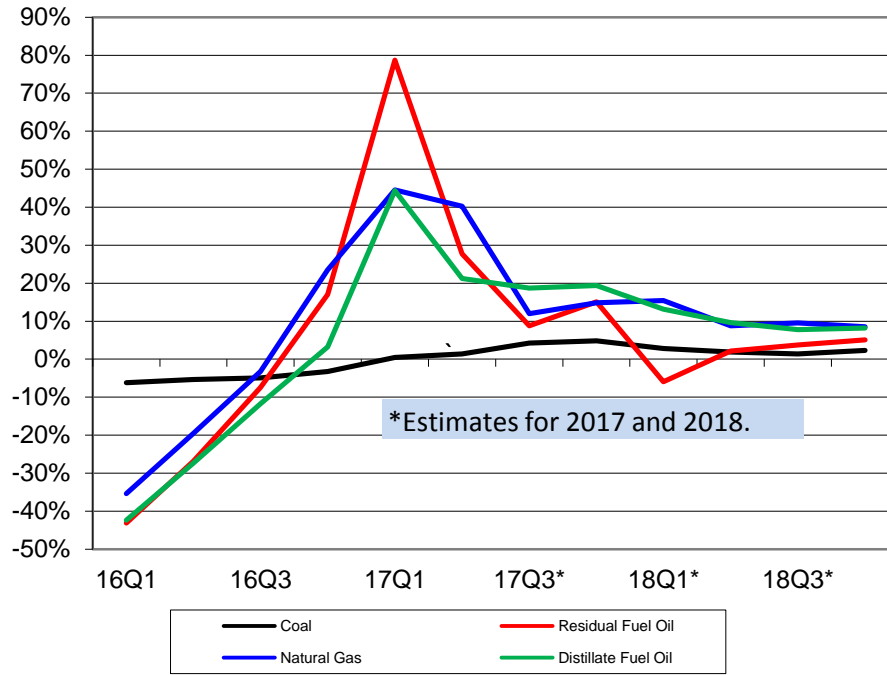
http://www.monitoringanalytics.com/reports/PJM_State_of_the_Market/2016/2016-som-pjm-volume1.pdf.

⁴¹ STEO; page 2.

Figure 15 Average hourly real-time generation of solar units in PJM: 2016



Electric Power Sector Fuel Prices (Percent Change, Year Ago)



Source: EIA, *Short-Term Energy Outlook*, Table 7a, Apr 2017.

Wholesale Electric Market Assessment Information

Price of Electricity Futures Contracts for March 7 and April 20, 2017

Twelve Month NYMEX Strip Components⁴²

\$/MWh (for \$/kWh, divide by 1000)

	Mar-17	Apr-17
May-17	\$ 35.35	\$ 35.76
Jun-17	\$ 36.47	\$ 37.16
Jul-17	\$ 44.55	\$ 46.63
Aug-17	\$ 40.75	\$ 42.38
Sep-17	\$ 34.99	\$ 36.53
Oct-17	\$ 33.50	\$ 34.45
Nov-17	\$ 33.57	\$ 34.60
Dec-17	\$ 37.43	\$ 38.50
Jan-18	\$ 52.45	\$ 54.21
Feb-18	\$ 48.56	\$ 50.11
Mar-18	\$ 38.83	\$ 38.88
Apr-18	\$ 33.58	\$ 33.20
May-18	\$ 33.86	\$ 33.61

PEPCO DC Zone Locational Marginal Price (Hourly Integrated LMP for the hour ending 1600)⁴³

April 21, 2017: **\$28.70**

The above are wholesale energy prices only. Transmission and distribution rates are not included.

Weather Forecast

1. Current for next few days to one week:

<http://www.cnn.com/Weather/>

<http://home.accuweather.com/>

2. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Climate Prediction Center Outlook:

<http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/>

⁴² <http://www.cmegroup.com/trading/energy/electricity/pjm-western-hub-peak-calendar-month-real-time-lmp.html>.

⁴³ <http://ftp.pjm.com/pub/account/lmpgen/lmpost.html>.