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Italy's 2013 thermal coal imports to be stable on-year at 19 million mt: Assocarboni

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Italy's thermal coal imports for 2013 are expected to remain stable year on year at 19 million mt, Rome-headquartered coal industry body Assocarboni said in a statement Wednesday.

The organization said that 80% of the country's thermal coal imports will come from the US, South Africa and Indonesia.

Assocarboni chairman Andrea Clavarino said that Italy should look to coal in order to diversify its energy mix and combat "uncompetitive and no longer sustainable" electricity prices.

He said that Italian companies currently face electricity prices that are 50% higher than the European average, mainly due to expensive natural gas and renewables, which make up more than 70% of the country's current energy mix.

"If Italy continues to ignore the contribution of coal to the production of competitive electricity, its envied industrial base will soon be at risk," Clavarino said, noting that Italy is the second biggest manufacturing country in Europe.

"Less natural gas, which is expensive and carries significant implications in terms of security of supply, and more coal and renewables: this is the simple proposal that Assocarboni put forward in Italy, based also on the experience of other countries, such as the UK, Germany, Spain and Turkey, which in 2013 increased the proportion of coal in their energy mix," he said.

Clavarino said that Italy's three oil-to-coal conversion projects in Porto Tolle, Vado Ligure and Saline Joniche, which are pending authorization, would increase coal's share in the energy mix from 12% to 16%.

According to figures supplied by Assocarboni, Europe is forecast to increase thermal coal imports by 5% over 2012.

Assocarboni also said in the statement that "competitive" coal prices will contribute to maintain the main European power producers "in the black" by compensating for the high cost of gas-fired power stations.

Platts data showed that European-delivered CIF ARA thermal coal 90-day prices have dropped 8% from the start of the year to \$82/mt Tuesday.

In the same period, Italian PSV day-ahead natural gas prices have remained mostly stable to Eur27.45/MWh Tuesday, according to Platts data.

The International Energy Agency's World Energy Outlook 2013 report published Tuesday said that global coal demand is set to grow 17% by 2035, with most of the growth focused in India, China and Southeast Asia.

It also said that in the European Union, gas will remain "squeezed" by growing renewables generation and competition from coal.