BEIJING—China has reduced emissions of a pollutant that causes acid rain by cleaning up coal-fired power plants, the Environment Ministry said Thursday, putting the country on track to meet a self-imposed target set for 2010.

But Environment Minister Zhou Shengxian was quoted on the ministry's Web site as telling Chinese lawmakers that the country's environmental problems were still serious and that air pollution levels in 113 cities remained "fairly high."

The country's reliance on coal as its main energy source for its rapidly growing economy will keep air pollution at a high level, and the country's increasing number of cars make it more difficult to tackle, he said.

Coal-powered power stations used an additional 400 million tons of coal between 2006 and 2008, he said.

However, Zhou said the country has cleaned up its coal-fired power plants and installed devices to limit sulfur dioxide. The chemical compound can cause respiratory and other health problems and falls back to Earth as acid rain, which harms the ecosystem.

Sulfur dioxide emissions were reduced by nearly 9 percent at the end of 2008 from 2005 levels, Zhou said, putting China on track to meet its 2010 goal of a 10 percent reduction of that pollutant.

The finding is an improvement over the 2000-05 period, during which China's sulfur dioxide emissions rose 28 percent, according to ministry figures cited by the official Xinhua News Agency.

China also reduced breathable particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide by about one-third from 2000 to 2008.

China relies on coal for 70 percent of its energy needs, with just over half used for power generation, but is investing in nuclear and hydropower as well as other renewable energy sources.

The United States and China are the world's two largest emitters of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide blamed for global warming, accounting for an estimated 40 percent of the global total. China has insisted that developed nations bear the main responsibility for cutting emissions and has not issued targets for limiting carbon dioxide emissions.