

Kuwait, among world's hottest places, lags on climate action

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A woman feeds stray cats at the marina in Kuwait City, Feb. 11, 2022. Last summer, birds dropped dead from the sky and shellfish baked to death in the bay. Yet Kuwait stayed silent as the rest of the region's wealthy petrostates joined a chorus of nations setting climate goals ahead of last fall's U.N. climate summit in Glasgow. Credit: AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo

It was so hot in Kuwait last summer that birds dropped dead from the sky.

Sea horses boiled to death in the bay. Dead clams coated the rocks, their shells popped open like they'd been steamed.

Kuwait reached a scorching temperature of 53.2 degrees Celsius (127.7 degrees Fahrenheit), making it among the hottest places on earth.

The extremes of climate change present existential perils all over the world. But the record heat waves that roast Kuwait each season have grown so severe that people increasingly find it unbearable.

By the end of the century, [scientists say being outside in Kuwait City](#) could be life-threatening—not only to birds. A recent study also linked 67% of heat-related deaths in the capital to climate change.

And yet, Kuwait remains among the world's top oil producers and exporters, and per capita is a significant polluter. Mired in political paralysis, it stayed silent as the region's petrostates joined a chorus of nations setting goals to eliminate emissions at home—though not curb oil exports—ahead of last fall's U.N. climate summit in Glasgow.

Instead, Kuwait's [prime minister](#) offered a years-old promise to cut emissions by 7.4% by 2035.

"We are severely under threat," said environmental consultant Samia Alduaij. "The response is so timid it doesn't make sense."

Racing to burnish their climate credentials and diversify their economies, Saudi Arabia pitches futuristic car-free cities and Dubai plans to ban plastic and multiply the emirate's green parks.

While the relatively small populations of oil-rich Gulf Arab states mean their pledges to cut emissions are minor in the grand scheme to limit global warming, they have symbolic significance.

Yet the gears of government in Kuwait, population 4.3 million, seem as stuck as ever—partly because of populist pressure in parliament, and partly because the same authorities that regulate Kuwait's emissions get nearly all of their revenue from pumping oil.

"The government has the money, the information and the manpower to make a difference," said lawmaker Hamad al-Matar, director of the parliamentary environmental committee. "It doesn't care about environmental issues."

The country continues to burn oil for electricity and ranks among the top global carbon emitters per capita, according to the World Resources Institute. As asphalt melts on highways, Kuwaitis bundle up for bone-chilling air-conditioning in malls. Renewable energy accounts for less than 1% of demand—far below Kuwait's target of 15% by 2030.

An hour drive outside the dingy suburbs of Jahra, [wind turbines](#) and [solar panels](#) rise from clouds of sand—the fruit of Kuwait's energy transition ambitions.

But nearly a decade after the government set up the solar field in the western desert, its empty lots are as glaring as its silicon and metal.

At first, the Shagaya Energy Park exceeded expectations, engineers said. The Persian Gulf's first plant to combine three different renewables—solar, wind and solar thermal—put Kuwait at the vanguard. The wind farm over-performed, generating 20% more power in the first year than anticipated, the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research reported.



Shoppers stroll through The Avenues Mall in Kuwait City, Feb. 11, 2022. Kuwait is ranked each year as among the hottest places on the planet. Last summer, birds dropped dead from the sky and shellfish baked to death in the bay. Yet Kuwait stayed silent as the rest of the region's wealthy petrostates joined a chorus of nations setting climate goals ahead of last fall's U.N. climate summit in Glasgow. Credit: AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo

But optimism and momentum soon evaporated. The government gave up control of the project to attract private money, an unprecedented move that raised a tangle of legal questions over how developers would sell electricity to the nation's sole power provider.

Instead of pressing ahead with the successful hybrid energy model,

investors devoted the rest of the park to the production of solar thermal power, the costliest kind. Years of delays and canceled tenders ensued. The project's fate remains uncertain.

"The people in charge made the wrong decisions," said Waleed al-Nassar, member of Kuwait's Supreme Councils for the Environment and Planning and Development. "There was no one who took action or wanted to understand. Everyone says, 'Let's just do what we've been doing for the last 70 years.'"

Disputes also have marred the natural gas industry. While natural gas causes sizable emissions of climate-warming gases, it burns more cleanly than coal and oil and could play a big role in a low-carbon future for Kuwait.

Kuwait's 63 trillion cubic feet meters of gas reserves, 1% of the world's total, remain largely untapped. Fields shared with Saudi Arabia in what's known as the neutral zone shut down for years as the countries sparred over land use.

The elected parliament, which views itself as a defender of Kuwait's natural resources against foreign companies and corrupt businessmen, frequently hampers gas exploration. Lawmakers long have sought to challenge the government's authority to award lucrative energy contracts, summoning oil ministers for interrogations on suspicion of mismanagement and stalling major projects.

The legislature similarly carries the mantle of preserving Kuwait's lavish welfare state, believing the government lacks accountability. Kuwaitis enjoy among the cheapest electricity rates and petrol prices in the world.

When ministers suggest the government stop spending so much on subsidies, lawmakers put up a fight—literally. Debates in the chamber

can devolve into fisticuffs.

"This is one of the biggest challenges. It's seen as an engrained right for every Kuwaiti citizen," said urban development expert Sharifa Alshalfan.

With sumptuous subsidies even for the wealthiest, she added, Kuwaitis live wastefully, leaving home air-conditioners running for months-long vacations.

"We have no measures that cities have taken around the world to incentivize individuals to change their behavior," she said.

Stagnation has plunged the country into a historic financial crisis. Kuwait's budget deficit soared over \$35.5 billion last year as oil prices plummeted.

While Saudi Arabia and the UAE compete for shares of a fast-growing [renewable energy](#) market, Kuwaiti environmentalists are taking on the role of town crier.

"Renewables make so much more financial sense," said Ahmed Taher, an energy consultant promoting a new economic model that cuts Kuwait's power subsidies by inviting homeowners to buy shares in a solar project. "(The government) needs to know how much more money Kuwait could save and how many more jobs it could have."

But for now, Kuwait keeps burning oil.

Layers of dense pollution blanket the streets. Sewage rushes into the steaming bay. Fish carcasses that wash ashore produce a lingering stench, what activists describe as a pungent manifestation of the country's politics.

"When you walk by the bay, you sometimes want to vomit," said Kuwaiti environmental advocate Bashar Al Huneidi. "The abusers are winning, and I get discouraged every day."

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