

EU eyes 90% cut to greenhouse gases by 2040

February 6 2024, by Marc BURLEIGH, with Julien Girault in Brussels



The latest EU climate announcements came as dozens of farmers protested outside the European Parliament building in Strasbourg.

The EU on Tuesday urged a 90-percent cut to its greenhouse gas emissions by 2040, even as the bloc's transition to a greener future was clouded by a widespread farmers' revolt.

The closely-watched announcement came as dozens of farmers protested outside the European Parliament building, angry over shrinking incomes, rising costs and what they say are increasingly onerous green regulations.

In unveiling the new target, the EU climate commissioner, Wopke Hoekstra, said the bloc would strive for a "fair transition"—allowing businesses to thrive and ensuring "nobody is left behind" as it seeks to become carbon-neutral by 2050.

"Based on the best available science, and a detailed impact assessment, we are recommending that the 2040 target should be a 90 percent emission cut" compared to 1990 levels, Hoekstra said.

In a sign of how politically fraught the environmental issue has become, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen gave key ground earlier on Tuesday by burying a plan to halve chemical pesticide use by the end of this decade.

She acknowledged the proposal had "become a symbol of polarization", with the legislation stalled amid divisions between EU lawmakers and member countries.

The 27-nation European Union is already working towards an interim target of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 55 percent by 2030.

But rising discontent could hamper attempts to adopt the 2040 goal of 90 percent cuts.

Far-right and anti-establishment parties have latched onto the farmers' movement and are predicted to make big gains in June elections to choose the members of the next EU assembly.

That vote will also lead to a new commission late this year. Von der

Leyen has not yet said whether she intends to seek a new mandate at its helm.

Backlash

There is an increasingly vocal backlash from some industries to the bloc's climate policies and several national leaders are now calling for a "pause" in new environmental rules.

Eleven EU countries, including France, Germany and Spain had sent a joint letter to Brussels saying that the transition for an "ambitious" 2040 target needs to be "fair and just" and "leave no-one behind, especially the most vulnerable citizens".

The recommended target given on Tuesday was accompanied by new post-2030 climate projections that the commission was required to produce in the wake of the COP28 UN climate negotiations that took place in December.

The next European Commission will be tasked with turning the outline into proposed legislation ahead of next year's international climate summit, COP30.

The 2040 plan would require a sizeable effort from every sector of the economy—from power generation to farming, which accounts for 11 percent of EU greenhouse gas emissions.

'Kid gloves'

But for environmental groups, the European Commission's ambition fell well short of what was needed.

The bloc's 2040 targets are expected to rely in part on the capture and storage of ambitious volumes of carbon dioxide—incensing campaigners who criticize the technologies as untested and instead want to see pledges to cut gross emissions.

Others rounded on the absence of a target date for phasing out fossil fuels and related subsidies.

"This is about as meaningful as a target to prevent lung cancer without any plan to end smoking," said Greenpeace campaigner Silvia Pastorelli.

With the UN's climate change body vying to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels and "considering the EU's responsibility for historical emissions, it would be fairer to aim for zero net emissions by 2040," the WWF group said.

It lamented the commission dropping a goal of cutting agricultural emissions—which account for 11 percent of overall EU emissions—by 30 percent, as had been evoked in a previous working document.

The European Consumer Organisation BEUC said that "however hard the Commission tries to handle farmers with kid gloves, facts are stubborn things: our food and agriculture systems contribute a big chunk of the EU's climate impact".

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