

What Corporations and Governments Mean by “Net-Zero”

When corporations and governments talk about net-zero, they are almost always referring to either:

1. Carbon offsetting schemes

Big polluters and their financial backers — from oil and gas companies to agribusiness and Wall Street banks — plan to continue emitting greenhouse gases while paying farmers, foresters, and others to “offset” their emissions, especially through “trapping carbon” in soil and trees. They then establish markets to trade that carbon. These transactions and crediting systems do not reduce emissions; they simply re-assign credit for any reductions to the party that continues to pollute. Thus, major emitters continue to emit while claiming to be hitting their net-zero goals by buying offsets.

More than a decade of carbon trading has shown that carbon markets are ineffective at reducing greenhouse gas emissions.¹ For example, in 2016 the European Commission found that only 2% of the United Nations’ premier offsetting scheme, the Clean Development Mechanism, had a high likelihood of being effective.² Carbon markets have been gamed to benefit polluters, failed to decrease emissions in line with science, and even led to increased emissions in many cases. They have been plagued by fraud, creative accounting, and a lack of environmental integrity.³

Carbon markets perpetuate environmental racism, compromise human rights, and undermine healthy, sustainable, and resilient communities and food systems.⁴ Carbon trading has exacerbated pollution hotspots in low-wealth communities and communities of color in the U.S. and throughout developing countries. Inadequate safeguards have led to violations of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and forest dwellers, land rights conflicts, and environmental devastation.⁵

Fossil fuel companies would like there to be ‘full fungibility’ between fossil carbon and carbon stored in trees and landscapes — and they would like to appropriate that biological carbon to support ‘business as usual’ approaches. But science makes clear that there are huge differences between fossil and biological carbon — and their functional role. Consequently one should not be used to offset the other.⁶

2. Technologies to remove emissions and geengineer the atmosphere

Corporations and governments also point to unproven, dangerous, and extraordinarily expensive technologies to magically remove carbon from the atmosphere at some point in the future, rather than reduce emissions today. These so-called “negative emissions technologies” aspire to capture emissions either at the source or after they are already in the atmosphere. They include carbon capture and storage, bioenergy with carbon capture and storage, blue and decarbonized hydrogen, and direct air capture. There are serious questions about the effectiveness of these technologies, especially their ability to work reliably at scale, their safety, and challenges around storage of the captured carbon. Though none of these technologies is widely tested or currently available at scale, net-zero-by-2050 pledges often rely heavily on them. Some governments and

¹ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/aug/24/kyoto-protocols-carbon-credit-scheme-increased-emissions-by-600m-tonnes>

² See: https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/ets/docs/clean_dev_mechanism_en.pdf

³ See: <https://greenfinanceobservatory.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/50-shades-carbon-final.pdf>

⁴ See: <https://foodtank.com/news/2019/09/opinion-why-talk-of-regenerative-agriculture-should-include-pesticide-reduction/>

⁵ See: <https://www.ienearth.org/carbon-offsets-cause-conflict-and-colonialism/>

⁶ See: <https://www.climatelandambitionrightsalliance.org/net-zero>

industry have gone a step further, banking on extensive and extraordinarily perilous interference in the Earth's climate system via geoengineering schemes like solar radiation management.⁷

Perpetuating Environmental Racism & Classism

Net-zero pledges are premised on the continued siting and expansion of dirty energy industries in BIPOC and low-wealth communities. Offsetting emissions elsewhere, pulling carbon out of the atmosphere, or geoengineering Earth's climate system do more than exacerbate the climate crisis. They perpetuate and exacerbate environmental racism and classism. And, furthermore, under these schemes, local air, land, and water pollution continues unabated as these false solutions do not reduce pollution and emissions at source. Public health and the local environment continue to be harmed. And the lives and livelihoods of BIPOC and low-wealth communities continue to be compromised and endangered.

Resources

For more on the extensive and fundamental flaws of "net-zero," please see the following resources:

- [Distraction from Climate Action: Article 6 False Solutions \(VIDEO\)](#), June 2021, Indigenous Environmental Network.
- [The Big Con: How Big Polluters are advancing a "net zero" climate agenda to delay, deceive, and deny](#), June 2021, by Corporate Accountability, Global Forest Coalition, Friends of the Earth International
- [Net Zero Producers Forum: A catalyst for climate ambition or yet another delaying tactic?](#) May 2021, by Oil Change International with Center for International Environmental Law, Climate Action Network Canada – Réseau action climat Canada, Environmental Defence, Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, Friends of the Earth U.S., Greenpeace, Stand.earth
- [Chasing Carbon Unicorns: The Deception of Carbon Markets and "Net Zero,"](#) February 2021, by Friends of the Earth International, La Via Campesina, Indigenous Environmental Network, Corporate Accountability, Asian Peoples' Movement on Debt and Development, Third World Network, Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, Climate Justice Alliance, Justica Ambiental
- [Not Zero: How 'net zero' targets disguise climate inaction - Joint technical briefing by climate justice organisations](#), October 2020, by ActionAid, Corporate Accountability, Friends of the Earth International, Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice, Third World Network, What Next?
- [10 myths about net zero targets and carbon offsetting, busted, by 41 Scientists](#), Climate Home News, December 12, 2020

⁷ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/22/climate-crisis-emergency-earth-day>