

# No need for countries to issue new oil, gas or coal licences, study finds

**Researchers say world has enough fossil fuel projects planned to meet demand forecasts to 2050 if net zero is reached**

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Thu 30 May 2024 19.00 BST

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The paper is expected to reignite criticism of the UK's Conservative government, which has promised hundreds of oil and gas exploration licenses to boost the North Sea industry. Photograph: Russ Bishop/Alamy

The world has enough fossil fuel projects planned to meet global energy demand forecasts to 2050 and governments should stop issuing new oil, gas and coal licences, according to a large study aimed at political leaders.

If governments deliver the changes promised in order to keep the world from breaching its climate targets no new fossil fuel projects will be needed, researchers at University College London and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) said on Thursday.

The data offered what they said was “a rigorous scientific basis” for global governments to ban new fossil fuel projects and begin a managed decline of the fossil fuel industry, while encouraging investment in clean energy alternatives.

By establishing a “clear and immediate demand” political leaders would be able to set a new norm around the future of fossil fuels, against which the industry could be held “immediately accountable”, the researchers said.

Published in the journal *Science*, the paper analysed global energy demand forecasts for oil and gas, as well as coal- and gas-fired electricity, using a broad range of scenarios compiled for the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that limited global heating to within 1.5C above pre-industrial levels.

It found that in addition to not needing new fossil fuel extraction, no new coal- and gas-fired power generation was needed in a net zero future.

The paper is expected to reignite criticism of the UK’s Conservative government, which has promised to offer hundreds of oil and gas exploration licenses to boost the North Sea industry, a policy that has emerged as a key dividing line with the opposition Labour party before the 4 July general election.

Labour has vowed to put an end to new North Sea licences if it comes to power, and also plans to increase taxes on the profits made by existing oil and gas fields to help fund investments in green energy projects through a new government-owned company, Great British Energy.

Dr Steve Pye, a co-author of the report from the UCL Energy Institute, said: “Importantly, our research establishes that there is a rigorous scientific basis for the proposed norm by showing that there is no need for new fossil fuel projects.”

“The clarity that this norm brings should help focus policy on targeting the required ambitious scaling of renewable and clean energy investment, whilst managing the decline of fossil fuel infrastructure in an equitable and just way,” Pye said.

The report expanded on work by the International Energy Agency (IEA) which has warned in recent years that no new fossil fuel projects were compatible with the global goal to build a net zero energy system.

The IEA ruled out any new investment in long-lead time fossil fuel projects, but acknowledged that continued investment would be required in existing oil and gas assets and already approved projects.

Dr Fergus Green, from the department of political science at UCL, said: “Our research draws lessons from past shifts in global ethical norms, such as slavery and the testing of nuclear weapons. These cases show that norms resonate when they carry simple demands to which powerful actors can be held immediately accountable.

“Complex, long-term goals like ‘net zero emissions by 2050’ lack these features, but ‘no new fossil fuel projects’ is a clear and immediate demand, against which all current governments, and the fossil fuel industry, can rightly be judged.”

The outgoing head of the UK’s Committee on Climate Change, Chris Stark, said last month that the concept of net zero had become a political slogan used to start a “dangerous” culture war over the climate, and may be better dropped.

“If it is only a slogan, if it is seen as a sort of holding pen for a whole host of cultural issues, then I’m intensely relaxed about dropping it,” Stark said. “We keep it as a scientific target, but we don’t need to use it as a badge that we keep on every programme.”

Green said a political stance on supporting new fossil fuel projects should “serve as a litmus test” on whether a government was serious about tackling the climate crisis. “If they’re allowing new fossil fuel projects, then they’re not serious,” he added.