

Fears over oil producers' influence with UAE as next host of Cop climate talks

More than 630 fossil fuel lobbyists attended Cop27, and the Emirates, where Cop28 will be held, is a major oil and gas exporter



The UAE's president, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (left), with the industry minister, Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, at Cop27 in Sharm el-Sheikh. Photograph: UAE Presidential Court/Reuters

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Tue 22 Nov 2022 06.00 GMT

Fears are growing among climate experts and campaigners over the influence of fossil fuel producers on global climate talks, as a key Gulf petro-state gears up to take control of the negotiations.

The **United Arab Emirates**, one of the world's biggest oil exporters, will hold the presidency of Cop28, the next round of UN climate talks that will begin in late November next year.

Decisions **taken at the Cop27 climate summit** in Egypt, which finished on Sunday, showed the clear imprint of fossil fuel influence, according to people inside the negotiations. They said Saudi Arabia – an ally of Egypt outside the

talks – played a key role in **preventing a strong commitment to limiting temperature increases** to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels.

Many countries, including the UK and the EU, were bitterly disappointed. Alok Sharma, the UK president of last year's Cop26 summit, said in visible anger at the conclusion of Cop27 on Sunday morning: "Those of us who came to Egypt to keep 1.5C alive, and to respect what every single one of us **agreed to in Glasgow**, have had to fight relentlessly to hold the line."

There were also at least 636 fossil fuel lobbyists attending the Cop27 talks in Egypt, of whom **70 were linked to UAE oil and gas companies**.

This has raised questions over what will happen next year. Yamide Dagnet, director for climate justice at the Open Society Foundations, warned: "We expect the theme for Cop28 to include energy, alongside resilience [to the impacts of climate breakdown], finance and the global stocktake. So we should not be naive and assume that fossil fuel lobbyists will relent."

Matthew Hedges, an expert on the Emirates' political economy, who was imprisoned and tortured for almost six months in the UAE capital, Abu Dhabi, during his doctoral research, said there could be a conflict of interests.

"The Emirates is a country with some of the world's largest oil reserves, with a desire to continue to expand and enhance fossil fuel production. There will be an effort to illustrate their engagement in renewables, particularly solar and nuclear, but there are questions to be asked about how you can engage in such conflicting actions," he said.

About 13% of the UAE's exports come directly from oil and gas, which represent about 30% of the country's GDP. Many of its other industries, including construction and travel, are also financially linked to fossil fuels.

At **Cop27**, Saudi and other Gulf states, along with Brazil and China, are also said to have stymied attempts to include a resolution to phase down fossil fuels in the final outcome. Hedges said: "The UEA and Saudi Arabia have a very similar view on fossil fuels. Both depend on their ability to process and export oil."

Alden Meyer, senior associate at the E3G environmental thinktank, said the final stages of Cop27, where negotiations ran more than 30 hours beyond the

final deadline and were severely criticised by participants as “untransparent, unpredictable and chaotic”, should provide a lesson in what can happen when a Cop host nation allows fossil fuel interests to wield too much influence.

“It’s hard to imagine running a worse process than the Egyptian presidency,” he said. “The spotlight at Cop28 is going to be on 1.5C, and UAE are going to have to deal with that. Hopefully they will be more neutral than the Egyptian presidency.”

Nick Mabey, a founding director of E3G, was more optimistic. “UAE is not Egypt, and not Saudi Arabia. They have very different interests and wish to position themselves differently,” he said. “They’ve said very different things about fossil fuels. That hopefully means they will have a more balanced approach.”

UAE also has close relations with Russia, which is another source of concern. Since Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine in February, there has been a steady flow of Russian cash to UAE, including partnerships on energy and an increase in imports of Russian oil to enable UAE to export more of its own.

Russia, a leading oil and gas producer, is the world’s fourth biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, and has gas production facilities so leaky that they are a big source of the powerful greenhouse gas methane.

Paul Bledsoe, a former Clinton White House climate adviser now with the Progressive Policy Institute in Washington DC, said: “Russia is one of the nations that should be facing our opprobrium over Cop27. They should be ashamed of themselves, but I think Vladimir Putin is beyond saving. He has weaponised oil and gas for cash and for his geopolitical ends.”

Simon Stiell, the UN climate chief, is said to be scrutinising the Cop processes, with a view to ensuring their transparency and smooth running. He will be under pressure to ensure that the process of negotiation is less susceptible to fossil fuel interests.

The Guardian approached the UAE multiple times at Cop27 without response. UAE had a large pavilion at Cop27, and a delegation of about 1,000 members, which was twice as many as the next biggest delegation, that of Brazil.

The UAE government has declared its intention to reach net zero by 2050, and has invested heavily in renewable energy. The International Renewable **Energy** Agency is headquartered in Abu Dhabi.