

# EU lays out plan to cut greenhouse emissions by 90% by 2040

Proposal is part of European Commission's aim to become world's first climate-neutral continent

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- Wopke Hoekstra, the EU climate commissioner, said that the bloc continues to 'lead the way' on climate action. Photograph: Ronald Wittek/EPA

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The EU aims to slash its net greenhouse gas pollution by 90% by 2040 as part of its push to become the world's first climate-neutral continent, the [European Commission](#) has announced before elections in June.

Under a landmark proposal laid out by its executive body on Tuesday, the bloc will have to pump 90% less planet-heating gas into the air by 2040 than it did in 1990, a figure which includes the carbon it removes from the atmosphere.

The target is at the bottom end of the 90-95% net cuts that the EU's scientific watchdog recommended in June, and meeting it would require a much faster shift to a clean economy. In the three decades between 1990 and 2021, the EU's 27 member states cut their emissions by just 30%, according to the European Environment Agency, leaving them half as long to do twice the work.

Wopke Hoekstra, the EU climate commissioner, said the target sent a message to the world that Europe "continues to lead the way" on climate action. "Tackling the climate crisis is a marathon, not a sprint. We need to make sure everyone crosses the finish line and nobody is left behind," he said.

The target, which is a recommendation for the next commission after European elections in June, is part of a bid to stop extreme weather from growing more violent. But some of the individual targets were scrapped at the last minute because of protests from farmers that have seen politicians in the EU and its member states row back on plans to make farms pollute less.

Pieter de Pous, a nature policy expert at the climate thinktank E3G, said: "It's hard to find a more fitting use of the metaphor 'cutting off the branch you sit on' than witnessing farmers unite in efforts to undermine the very climate policies designed to protect them from the devastating impacts of climate change."

The final document no longer refers to cutting agricultural emissions of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas belched out by cows, or nitrogen, a pollutant in fertiliser and manure that reacts to form heat-trapping gases. The text instead states that its purpose is to launch the political debate. "It does not propose new policy measures or set new sector-specific targets."

The scrapped farming target is the third concession to farmers in the last week, after Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, told lawmakers on Tuesday morning that she would take back a proposal to use fewer pesticides. Last week she asked member states to delay a key rule to save wildlife and protect soils.

The EU has sped up its energy transition in recent years by building sources of clean electricity, such as wind turbines and solar panels, at a faster pace. Under the new proposal, it plans to use 80% less fossil fuels in the energy sector by 2040 than it did in 2021.

But it has made little progress in cleaning up sectors like food and transport.

Keeping the exemption in the agriculture sector “sets a worrisome precedent as negotiations on climate ambition begin”, said De Pous.

The 2040 target was announced on Tuesday in the European parliament alongside a new strategy to capture carbon. The commission had previously proposed a target to capture 50m tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> a year by 2030 and wants that to rise to 280m tonnes by 2040.

By then, the commission has suggested, the EU should emit less than 850 megatonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e and remove up to 400 megatonnes from land and industry.

Kadri Simon, the EU energy commissioner, said renewables and energy efficiency were still “central” to climate neutrality but that reaching net zero emissions also meant using technologies to manage carbon.

Environmental groups and scientists are divided on how big a role capturing carbon from factories and removing it from the atmosphere should play in the energy transition. Experts have said that the technology is the most promising way to clean up some heavy industries like cement, and it could also compensate for leftover emissions from sectors that are hard to clean up.

But the promise of carbon capture in the future is also used by governments and oil companies to keep burning fuels that pollute the air with other toxic particles, and to allow them to cut emissions more slowly today.

Silvia Pastorelli, a climate and energy campaigner at Greenpeace, said the commission’s plans did not meet the EU’s responsibility to fight climate breakdown. “While it sounds like a big number, this target uses some creative accounting with promised carbon capture to hide much lower actual emission cuts.”

She added: “Without honesty about an end to fossil fuels and finally tackling farming emissions, it’s hard to see how the EU will even clear this too-low bar it’s setting itself.”