

# CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from new North Sea drilling sites would match 30 years' worth from UK households

New research comes as dozens of small potential fields have received some form of license from the government

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The government has pledged not to issue any new licenses to oil and gas fields, but has stopped short of rescinding licences currently in the pipeline. Photograph: Terry Whittaker/imageBROKER/Shutterstock

Potential new North Sea oil and gas fields with early stage licences from the UK would emit as much carbon dioxide as British households produce in three decades.

The finding has led to calls to the government to reject demands from fossil fuel producers for the final permits needed to allow their operations to go ahead.

Dozens of small potential sites, and several controversial large projects such as the Jackdaw and Rosebank fields, have received some form of licence, though they are not yet operational.

If they all went ahead the resulting emissions would have a global impact on the ability to stave off catastrophic levels of climate change, according to research by the campaigning group Uplift.

Sites that have been licensed for drilling but have not yet been developed are estimated to hold up to 3.8bn barrels of oil equivalent. If burned, this would release 1.5bn tonnes of carbon dioxide. Emissions from the UK's 28m households amount to about 50m tonnes a year.

Tessa Khan, executive director of Uplift, said: "The scale of the planned drilling by fossil fuel companies in the North Sea is alarming. How can it be right that, while we strive to reduce our climate impact – and household emissions fall from people installing solar panels and switching to heat pumps – the oil and gas industry is given a free pass to generate massive emissions?"

The government has pledged not to issue any new licenses to oil and gas fields, but has stopped short of rescinding licences currently in the pipeline. Under the UK's licensing regime, exploration licences can be issued at an early stage, and it can often take years or decades before progressing to the next stage of receiving the production permits necessary for operation.

The previous government's enthusiasm for licensing – and vow to drain "every last drop" from the North Sea – has meant that the pipeline is well stocked with potential new fields.

Under the Conservatives, fields were subject to climate checks before being given the green light, but these checks did not take account of the carbon dioxide emissions resulting from burning the oil and gas produced from the fields.

That changed in June, shortly before the general election, when a landmark ruling by the supreme court – called the "Finch ruling" after the campaigner Sarah Finch, who brought the initial case – found that such emissions must be taken into account.

When Labour took power, the government issued fresh advice to operators, that they must include emissions from burning the oil and gas in their environmental assessments. A government consultation to establish in detail how potential new fields should be treated is now under way, and will close in early January.

The new research by Uplift, seen by the Guardian, is the first to expose the impacts of the potential pipeline of new fields. Khan said ministers should make clear they would effectively shut down new fields.

“We finally have a government that is willing to apply common sense and accept that the emissions from burning oil and gas should be factored into decisions on whether or not to approve new drilling,” she said. She called on the UK to send a strong signal to other countries, which are also considering new drilling.

“Governments around the world also know that we have discovered more fossil fuels than are safe to burn and that some reserves need to be kept in the ground if we are to stay within safe climate limits. There is compelling evidence that the emissions from new North Sea drilling are incompatible with these limits,” she said.

The ban on new licences – which applies to potential fields that have not yet received any form of permit – should prevent about 4bn barrels of oil being produced. The government will consult next year on how to implement this ban.

Labour faces stiff challenges, however, from the oil and gas industry, and from oil and gas workers and the unions which represent them.

Mark Wilson, operations director for Offshore Energies UK, which represents the oil and gas industry, said: “UK oil and gas demand is forecast to outstrip domestic production, even if these resources are brought to market. Limiting the production and therefore the supply of UK oil and gas within a mature and declining basin like the North Sea is not an effective way to address the challenge of delivering a net zero energy future.

“Preventing the development of existing reserves and resources won’t fix the climate challenge, but it will threaten UK jobs, communities and income and negatively impact the livelihoods of the skilled people whose expertise we need to deliver the UK’s net zero goals.”

Uplift’s Khan said the government must provide a “just transition” for workers, but pointed out that the future of the North Sea would be one of steep decline, even if resources were poured into extraction.

“New drilling is not the answer for the UK’s energy workers. In the past decade, despite new fields being approved and hundreds of new licenses being handed out, the number of jobs supported by the industry has more than halved as the North Sea declines,” Khan highlighted.

“What supply chains, workers, and their communities have long needed is a proper plan to create good quality, clean energy jobs in the places that need

them most. This is the critical job for government. Approving new drilling delays the UK's transition and distracts from the urgent action that workers need today.”

A spokesperson for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero said: “Our priority is a fair, orderly and prosperous transition in the North Sea in line with our climate and legal obligations, which drives towards our clean energy future of energy security, lower bills and good, long-term jobs. We will not revoke existing oil and gas licences and will manage existing fields for the entirety of their lifespan, and we will not issue new oil and gas licences to explore new fields.”

The spokesperson added: “Clean, homegrown energy is the best way to protect bill payers and secure Britain's energy independence while tackling climate change, which is why we announced the biggest ever investment in offshore wind and are moving ahead with new North Sea industries like carbon capture and storage and hydrogen.”