

‘Godfathers of climate chaos’: UN chief urges global fossil-fuel advertising ban

António Guterres says world faces ‘climate crunch time’ and announces dire new scientific warnings of global heating

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Firefighters work to extinguish a wildfire in Evros, Greece, in August last year. Photograph:

Ayhan Mehmet/Anadolu via Getty Images

Fossil-fuel companies are the “godfathers of climate chaos” and should be banned in every country from advertising akin to restrictions on big tobacco, the secretary general of the United Nations has said while delivering dire new scientific warnings of global heating.

In a major speech in New York on Wednesday, António Guterres called on news and tech media to stop enabling “planetary destruction” by taking fossil-fuel

advertising money while warning the world faces “climate crunch time” in its faltering attempts to stem the crisis.

“Many governments restrict or prohibit advertising for products that harm human health, like tobacco,” he said. “I urge every country to ban advertising from fossil-fuel companies. And I urge news media and tech companies to stop taking fossil-fuel advertising.”



Oceans face 'triple threat' of extreme heat, oxygen loss and acidification

In his speech, Guterres announced new data from the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) showing there is an 80% chance the planet will breach 1.5C (2.7F) in warming above pre-industrial times in at least one of the next five calendar years. The past 12 months have already breached this level, with the average global temperature 1.63C (2.9F) higher than the pre-industrial average from June 2023 to May of this year, following a string of months with record-breaking heat, according to the European Union’s Copernicus monitoring system.

Governments agreed in the 2015 Paris climate pact to restrain the global temperatures rise to 1.5C to avoid cascading heatwaves, floods, droughts and other ruinous impacts, and while a single year beyond this limit does not mean the target has been lost, scientists widely expect this to happen in the coming decade.



António Guterres speaking at the American Museum of Natural History in New York on Wednesday. Photograph: David Dee Delgado/Reuters

According to the WMO, there is a roughly 50-50 chance that the period of 2024 to 2028 will average above 1.5C in warming, globally. “We are playing Russian roulette with our planet,” Guterres, known for his strident language on the climate crisis, told an audience underneath a suspended 94ft model of a blue whale at the American Museum of Natural History. “We need an exit ramp off the highway to climate hell.”

In a nod to the venue of his speech, Guterres said that “like the meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs, we’re having an outsized impact. In the case of climate, we are not the dinosaurs – we are the meteor. We are not only in danger – we are the danger.”

Guterres insisted that the 1.5C target was “still just about possible” but said there needed to be far greater effort from countries to slash carbon emissions, to boost climate finance to poorer countries, and for the fossil-fuel industry to be made pariahs by governments, the media and other businesses for its role in causing the climate crisis.

“The godfathers of climate chaos – the fossil-fuel industry – rake in record profits and feast off trillions in taxpayer-funded subsidies,” he said. “It is a disgrace that the most vulnerable are being left stranded, struggling desperately to deal with a climate crisis they did nothing to create.

“We cannot accept a future where the rich are protected in air-conditioned bubbles, while the rest of humanity is lashed by lethal weather in unlivable lands.”

‘Stop taking fossil-fuel advertising’

Guterres attacked fossil-fuel firms for their meagre investments in cleaner forms of energy and for “distorting the truth, deceiving the public and sowing doubt” about climate science, before calling for government bans on fossil-fuel advertising and for public relations and media companies to cut ties with oil, gas and coal interests.

“I call on these companies to stop acting as enablers to planetary destruction. Stop taking on new fossil-fuel clients, from today, and set out plans to drop your existing ones. Fossil fuels are not only poisoning our planet – they’re toxic for your brand.”

Reached for comment about the speech, Megan Bloomgren, senior vice-president of communications at the American Petroleum Institute, the biggest US industry trade group, said: “Our industry is focused on continuing to produce affordable, reliable energy while tackling the climate challenge, and any allegations to the contrary are false.”

Guterres lauded the growth in clean-energy deployment, amid record levels of investment in wind, solar and other renewable sources, predicting that “economic logic makes the end of the fossil-fuel age inevitable”, but added that governments must hasten the phase-out of fossil fuels.

“It’s ‘we, the peoples’ versus the polluters and the profiteers,” he said. “Together, we can win. But it’s time for leaders to decide whose side they’re on.”

The speech was timed to act as a key rallying call by a UN leadership concerned that the climate crisis has slipped down the list of priorities for a world racked by war in Ukraine and Gaza, and other economic worries. A meeting of the powerful G7 group of countries will take place in Italy next week, followed by November’s Cop29 climate summit, to be held in Azerbaijan, along with a G20 gathering in Brazil.



'Game-changing': Vermont becomes first state to require big oil to pay for climate damages

Countries are currently working on new pledges on how they will cut emissions until 2035, with these promises to be delivered by next year. Governments have not kept pace with previous pledges, however, with emissions rising to a new record level last year at a time when they must be halved by 2030 to avoid the worst climate effects.

Even though there are hopes that last year will represent a peak in global emissions, there “lies the bleak reality that we are way off track to meet the goals set in the Paris agreement”, said Ko Barrett, secretary general of the WMO.

The world is also lagging in progress towards a pledge made in December to triple renewable electricity generation by 2030, although there are signs that the pace of deployment has started to quicken.

The impacts of the climate crisis continue to be made increasingly vivid amid this wrangling, with countries including India and the US recently gripped by severe heatwaves. A study released this week found that extensive flooding that has devastated parts of southern Brazil, leading to 169 deaths, was made at least twice as likely due to human-caused climate change.

“The problem is now urgent, and we can’t say we need to do something about it in the future, we need to take action now,” said Andrea Dutton, a climate scientist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. “The earlier we start making big cuts to emissions, the earlier we can start making a difference.”

Additional reporting by Dharna Noor