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Energy, News, Politics

New summit in Colombia seeks to revive stalled UN talks on fossil fuel transition

Colombia will host the first conference on transitioning away from fossil fuels, after more than 80 countries pushed at COP30 for an end to coal, oil and gas

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A landmark conference hosted by Colombia and the Netherlands will aim to lay the foundations for renewed talks on transitioning away from fossil fuels at COP31, though organisers say it remains unclear what concrete outcomes it will deliver.

The First Conference on the Transition Away from Fossil Fuels will take place in April in the city of Santa Marta, on Colombia's Caribbean coast, where first-moving countries, states and cities will seek to restart last year's stalled push for a global roadmap away from coal, oil and gas.

Bastiaan Hassing, head of international climate policy for the Dutch government, told an online briefing last week that the "most obvious" impact of the conference would be for its hosts to report back to the UN climate summit on what was agreed in Santa Marta.

“Ideally, but this is also more complicated, we discuss with each other (at COP) what next steps we could take in the implementation, for instance, of paragraph 28 of the COP decision in Dubai, which talks about the global transition away from fossil fuels,” Hassing said.

He noted that there are many options for how the conference can influence UN talks on implementing the global transition away from fossil fuels, but the exact possibilities would depend on the outcome of the gathering. “Rest assured that we will be looking into this,” he added.

At last year’s COP30, a bloc of 80 countries, including small island states, as well as some Latin American, European, and African countries, called for the creation of a roadmap to transition away from fossil fuels.

But major oil and gas producers and consumers blocked the initiative in Belém. As a compromise, Brazil’s COP presidency promised to draft proposals for two voluntary roadmaps: one to end deforestation and another to guide the transition away from fossil fuels.

Brazil has launched consultations seeking input for those plans, asking governments and stakeholders about technological and economic barriers, climate justice considerations and examples of best practice. Last week, COP30 president André Corrêa do Lago told Brazilian media that he would hold discussions on his roadmap proposal at the Santa Marta conference.

Colombia’s environment minister Irene Vélez Torres told reporters last week that “this is the moment to be honest about

the challenges involved in transitioning away from fossil fuels”.

“It is not easy. It involves commitments from both the Global North and South. It involves interests and tensions at the subnational level,” she added. “Yet none of this diminishes its urgency or the need to reach agreements at the international multilateral level.”

Process to end fossil fuels

Vélez Torres said she hoped the Santa Marta meeting would help establish an ongoing process to advance discussions that often stall in the formal UN negotiations, where decisions are made by consensus and fossil fuel producers resist stronger language.

“This is the first conference, and we want it to be followed by another. We also want to establish a technical secretariat to sustain these debates,” said Vélez Torres, who added that the initiative would be “articulated with [the] COP30 and COP31” presidencies.

Colombia has been one of the few fossil fuel-producing countries that pledged to halt all new coal, oil and gas exploration. The move triggered backlash from industry and political opponents – with former president Iván Duque calling the decision “political and economic suicide”. The South American country depends on fossil fuels for about 10% of fiscal revenues and 4% of GDP, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Organisers of the Santa Marta conference said they expect between 40 and 80 high-level representatives from

governments, both at national and subnational levels. Colombian president Gustavo Petro is expected to participate, and invitations have been extended to California governor Gavin Newsom and Dutch prime minister Rob Jetten.

Deep divisions persist as plastics treaty talks restart at informal meeting.

No turning back

The conference comes amid renewed volatility in global energy markets. As the US and Israel's war in Iran disrupts oil and gas supplies and threatens to cause severe global economic damage, analysts say governments should seek to reduce their dependency on fossil fuels through investments in renewables and energy efficiency.

The upcoming Santa Marta conference should build momentum to plan that transition away from fossil fuels and signal that “there is no turning back”, said Peter Newell, professor of international relations at the University of Sussex and one of the main proponents of a fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty.

“Its outcomes, which might include a declaration on key principles and next steps (for the fossil fuel transition), should give renewed vigour to efforts within the UN climate negotiations to drive the agenda forward,” Newell said.

Because major fossil fuel producers have effectively “vetoed” discussions on a fossil fuel phase-out at COPs, he added, willing countries must move forward independently with initiatives like the Santa Marta conference.

Andreas Sieber, head of political strategy at the NGO 350.org, agreed that the push away from fossil fuels is “both necessary and economically inevitable”, adding that a conference on phasing out fossil fuels would have been “unthinkable just five years ago”.

US set to exit UN climate convention in February 2027

Countries moving forward

COP30 host Brazil has taken the lead in developing its own national roadmap away from fossil fuels, which President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva requested his government to draft late last year. The roadmap is expected to be formally developed this year.

The plan – expected to include a dedicated energy transition fund – was initially due in February but has not yet been made public as ministers continue technical discussions.

In Europe, governments have also stepped up efforts to curb fossil fuel use following the energy shocks triggered by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East.

Leo Roberts, a fossil fuel transition analyst at the climate think tank E3G, said the recent surge in gas prices linked to the Iran conflict reinforces the case for accelerating the transition to boost energy security and protecting people from price shocks.

“Hopefully, Santa Marta is able to really demonstrate that not only is there momentum at the international sphere through the COP30 roadmap process, but there’s huge momentum

away from fossil fuels in the real world,” he said.