



Why is net zero-greenhouse gases by 2050 dangerous?

The Committee on Climate Change says the UK should now aim for 'net zero' greenhouse gases by 2050. Much faster cuts are needed to avoid playing Russian roulette with the planet.

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1.5 degrees global warming doesn't sound much in terms of weather: it's not even the difference between a light jacket or cardigan. But measured in global temperature rises, it's species-ending.

It would sound the death knell for 90 per cent of coral reefs across the globe. 62 million people suffered the effects of extreme weather in 2019 and many more will be harmed by more droughts, floods and wildfires as temperatures increase. The harvest from a range of staple crops and fisheries would shrink because of extreme weather, while population continues to rise. And an unstoppable melting of the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets could be set in chain with just 1.5 degrees of warming, leading to a multi-metre sea level rise.

Avoiding this level of warming should be a priority for all governments.

This is the backdrop to this important Committee on Climate Change report which demonstrates that the UK can get to 'net-zero' greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 without spending more money than it was already committed to when it signed up to 80% cuts by the same date. Doing so would bring significant benefits for health and nature, as well as reduce costs to the NHS.

I warmly welcome this report, but the UK could, and should, go even further and faster.

The Committee on Climate Change report identifies what they say is the UK's fair share of emissions cuts for a roughly 50:50 chance of avoiding 1.5 degrees. Importantly it says all these cuts should be made in the UK, with no international offsetting and that international aviation and shipping emissions included in the calculations.

Even with these welcome safeguards this ambition is still not enough. Even Russian roulette offers better odds than this 50:50 chance of avoiding disaster.

Net-zero by 2045 or earlier

Net zero by 2045 is doable but with determination, innovation and endeavour a much earlier date will be possible.

The school strikes and street protests of the last few weeks are rightfully demanding urgent action on climate change. The government needs to rapidly respond positively to the CCC report and put in place the policies and spending plan to slash emissions.

The main actions needed to deliver carbon emissions quickly are already clear - they are not deeply mysterious.

Action on transport - speed-up the sale of electric cars, vans and buses and put in place a ban to stop the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2030. Make sure that electric charging points are widely available, including in rural areas.

And to encourage people out of their cars, invest in brilliant and cheap public transport, cycling and walking everywhere. Free bus travel for the under 30s should be provided, with this extended over time to free bus travel for all.

It's not that radical for a government to provide the means of getting around affordably, and with minimum environmental impact.

Make energy generation green - stop generating electricity from dirty fuels and ban fracking. Aim for 100% clean energy from the wind, sun and sea. Renewable energy can replace carbon-based fuels (coal, oil and gas) in our electricity, heating and transport.

The UK has one of the world's biggest renewable resources and rapidly expanding our offshore wind industry will

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keep us positioned as a world leader, with the jobs and economic advantages this brings.

Ultimately we should be aiming for 8 times more energy from renewable sources than we currently generate.

Improve homes - end the misery of cold, expensive-to-heat homes. Fund a massive insulation scheme and shift to eco-friendly heating, such as heat pumps.

Chilly Sweden is leading the way on this eco-heating transformation which demonstrates that we don't need to heat our homes with natural gas.

The government will need to provide householders with grants that cover the full cost of replacing their old boilers.

Make hydrogen from renewable energy not fossil fuels - kick start a renewable energy to hydrogen industry. This would enable the UK to store excess renewable energy in the summer for use in the winter when there is less daylight and energy demands are higher. The Committee on Climate Change is wrongly backing hydrogen production from polluting natural gas.

Use land better - stop using our land for intensive farming. Double tree cover to help stop climate change and let wildlife thrive, as do other important natural climate solutions such as restoring peatlands and salt marshes.

Planting more trees at this scale means changing the way we use land. Too much of the UK is gobbled up by animal farming - including growing the crops to feed them. Eating less and better meat will reduce the demand on the land, be good for our health, and free up more space for forests.

More UK production of timber would also reduce our imports of timber, currently the UK is one the biggest importer of timber in the world spending £5.3 billion a year on imports.

Scrap backing climate-wrecking infrastructure - stop backing projects that fuel climate change, like airport expansion. Start making climate change a deal-breaker in all spending decisions. This includes stop funding fossil fuels overseas and instead pay its fair share to support more-vulnerable countries to cut carbon pollution and deal with the impacts of climate change.

Protest works

The School Strikers, the councils of all political persuasions that have passed climate emergency motions, and the Extinction Rebellion activists have smashed into the debate and achieved coverage and headlines that almost seem unbelievable. But they did it. The Committee on Climate Change have now added their voice.

While we may argue about the exact date for achieving net zero all sides agree that we need to get on with it. The ball is now firmly in the government's court. They need to respond fast, and make sure that the forthcoming spending review puts climate change dead and centre.