

Climate Action or Greenwashing: How to look past the fluff in “Net-zero strategies”

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BACKGROUND

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Climate Action or Greenwashing?

With the growing urgency to address climate change, there has been an influx of “net-zero” strategies developed by governments and companies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, according to the [UN’s High Level Expert Group](#), many of these strategies are not [based on credible science](#) and are actually used to greenwash polluters and delay climate action. This guide will help distinguish between acceptable climate action strategies and greenwashing tactics.

Background:

To mitigate the worst of the climate damages that we face, we need to limit global heating to 1.5°C. According to the [Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change](#) (IPCC), global emissions need to be [cut in half this decade](#). There is an urgent need for strong climate action in all sectors to curtail the ever-increasing GHG emissions in our atmosphere.

However, in place of favoring immediate emissions reductions, governments and companies are choosing to adopt long-term climate goals and frame them as “net-zero” targets. The concept of “net-zero by 2050” is based on the assumption that there are some acceptable emissions that are excused from having to be reduced, and can be neutralized through emissions removals or using offsets. Instead of focusing solely on a “net-zero” strategy, governments and companies should pursue achieving “real zero” targets by aiming to reduce emissions as close to zero as possible, in all possible sectors.

Risks of “Net-Zero by 2050”:

There is an inherent risk in using 2050 as the sole target date for climate action as it implies that emitters don’t have to act with urgency and can postpone emissions reductions for later. Using net-zero as the main frame for a climate strategy also suggests that emitters don’t have to prioritize reducing emissions from their operations but can rather remove emissions through unproven carbon removal technologies, [such as CCUS](#), and by using carbon offsets.

An overreliance on CCUS will continue to preserve the status quo and risks diverting resources from the [proven, cost effective solutions](#) that are needed in the near-term to dramatically reduce emissions. Another concern to note in many of the net-zero plans is the dependence on carbon offsets, which can [lack environmental integrity](#) and [additionality](#), while helping emitters escape accountability.

For Canada to be successful in meeting its climate commitments, the priority needs to be on getting its domestic emissions as close to zero as possible, as fast as possible. [Research](#) shows that the most effective way to meet climate goals is to act urgently in the short-term and have a strong plan for long-term action. [This decade is decisive](#) - there needs to be strong interim targets (2026 and 2030) to ensure that we have a chance to get a handle on our emissions and create a climate-safe world.

A guide to differentiate between credible climate strategies and greenwashing attempts:

Does it align with a science-based pathway? – Strategies should look to stay aligned with a pathway that is consistent with keeping global heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius. They should also prioritize immediate action with ambitious interim targets (2026 and 2030) that keep them on trajectory to achieving long term goals.

Does it prioritize rapid decarbonisation? – Credible climate plans must prioritize expansion of clean energy sources (wind, solar, electric vehicles), which are [cheaper and more efficient](#) than their fossil fuel counterparts. Renewable technologies are also currently available and are proven to work.

Does it phase fossil fuels out of its supply chain? – Strategies should not be considered legitimate if they propose continued reliance on fossil fuels. This means that any legitimate climate plan should incorporate a phaseout of fossil fuels (i.e. no new funding or expansion of fossil fuel projects) and instead focus on supporting the transition of their operations to 100% renewable energy sources.

Does it avoid speculative technologies? - Technologies such as CCUS are touted by many governments and companies as the solution to climate change. However, in reality, these technologies are [expensive, unproven at scale and have very limited success rates](#), while locking us into a [continued dependence on fossil fuels](#). For climate strategies to be considered credible, they should prioritize proven methods of emissions reduction in favor of emissions removal through unproven technologies.

Is it comprehensive in scope of emissions covered? – For climate strategies to be comprehensive, they need to cover direct and indirect emissions released, including emissions released in the use of their products - commonly referred to as scope 3 emissions. A vast majority of emissions released are in the burning of fossil fuels and for climate strategies to be effective, they need to address them.

Does it rely on actual emissions reductions? – Climate strategies can not be considered feasible if there is inclusion of offsets, domestic or international. Because the entire world will need to get as close to zero emissions as possible, the use of offsets become irrelevant as there can be no “away”. Additionally, many carbon offsets [lack environmental integrity and additionality](#).

Does it plan for a just transition? - Credible climate strategies should advance a just transition, meaning that the net-zero strategies are written in partnership with all rights holders (local Indigenous nations and governments) and stakeholders (workers and communities) affected by the transition, and potential adverse impacts on these stakeholders are proactively identified, disclosed and addressed.

About Environmental Defence

[Environmental Defence](#) is a leading Canadian environmental advocacy organization that works with government, industry and individuals to defend clean water, a safe climate and healthy communities.

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