**Headline:** Fossil Fuels’ ‘Net-Zero’ Carbon Emissions Scam Is Something Humanity Doesn’t Have Time For

**Teaser:** Why vague commitments by fossil fuel corporations to “zero out” carbon emissions don’t add up.

By Patti Lynn

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**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Earth | Food | Life*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/earth-food-life/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Climate Change, Environment, Opinion

**Images:** <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1T4VMucK5z0I2rhfUPdgkgVpZvyxNud1M?usp=sharing>

**[Article Body:]**

Fossil fuel giant Shell took time in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic to announce on April 16 that it was going to work toward reducing its emissions to “net-zero” by [2050](https://fortune.com/2020/04/16/net-zero-emissions-shell-oil-industry-gas/#:~:text=Energy%20giant%20Royal%20Dutch%20Shell,the%20nature%20of%20its%20business.). The announcement comes on the heels of BP’s pledge in February to do the same. Both plans have been met with healthy amounts of skepticism. Many people pointed out the [vague language](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/12/climate/bp-greenhouse-gas-emissions.html) of BP’s commitment to “zero out” its carbon emissions. And there are [serious](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2020/feb/12/bp-statement-on-reaching-net-zero-carbon-emissions-by-2050-what-it-says-and-what-it-means) [doubts](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-12/big-oil-has-big-plans-for-net-zero-are-they-credible?srnd=green) as to whether any of this will actually result in action by the corporations to reduce emissions. Remember BP’s “[Beyond Petroleum](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2000/jul/25/bp)” slogan in the early 2000s, which was all PR and no action? And then there’s the fact that [Shell openly admitted to influencing the U.N. climate treaty’s Paris Agreement](https://theintercept.com/2018/12/08/shell-oil-executive-boasts-that-his-company-influenced-the-paris-agreement/), including by advancing measures that promote “net-zero” approaches.

But the problem with these corporations’ pledge is even more basic. It assumes that net-zero is the ultimate goal—that achieving net-zero will solve the climate crisis. This assumption has been thoroughly perpetuated by companies (like BP and Shell) that are deeply invested in the status quo—so much so that it has been adopted even by those who care deeply about the climate crisis. But there are significant flaws in the logic of net-zero, and if that’s what we aim for as we tackle the climate crisis, we will fail to make the changes we need to.

The first thing we need to get clear on is what “net-zero” actually means. So let’s break it down.

In the simplest terms, it’s basic arithmetic on a balance sheet: You earn $100 and you spend $100—now you’re at net-zero. As a term applied to carbon emissions, it means that you release 100 tons of carbon in the air, and someone else does something to take away 100 tons of carbon from the atmosphere.

Sure, it sounds good. But here are three significant ways that aiming for net-zero will not get us to where we need to be, climate-wise.

**1. The Concept Behind Net-Zero Relies Heavily on Risky and Untested Technologies.**

You’ve seen those Exxon ads where a tree transforms into a storage plant for carbon. Or you might have heard about [spraying particles](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/geoengineering-treatment-stratospheric-aerosol-injection-climate-change-study-today-2018-11-23/) into the atmosphere to cool global temperatures. BP, Exxon and other big polluters want to continue to send a whole lot of greenhouse gases up into the atmosphere—and they’re banking on [new, untested technologies](https://www.carbonbrief.org/explainer-six-ideas-to-limit-global-warming-with-solar-geoengineering) to capture or somehow offset the effect of these gases on the environment. But by now, we should know that our society’s infatuation with creating new technologies as fixes only leads to more and bigger problems. (Like GMO seeds and the profound implications they have for the future of [small-scale farming](https://tinyurl.com/qybdm8r)—or farming at all.) There are a host of ways these technologies could fail or result in unintended consequences—like accidentally causing irreversible temperature rise—that we need to be talking about.

**2. These Technologies and Other Net-Zero Schemes are Inherently Unjust.**

Thanks in part to [Donald Trump](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/12/climate/trump-trees-climate-change.html), the idea of planting lots of trees to absorb carbon is now part of the popular imagination. But dig a little deeper and you’ll see that this and other similar schemes rely on having vast tracts of land, which will result in [land grabs](https://news.trust.org/item/20200205160427-r1ydk) by corporations and other powerful forces, with little regard for the farmers, Indigenous people, and others who live on and take care of the land. And that idea about spraying aerosols into the air? There’s a whole host of possible negative effects, including possible [decreased rainfall](https://www.carbonbrief.org/geoengineering-carries-large-risks-for-natural-world-studies-show) and [increased drought](https://www.carbonbrief.org/unregulated-solar-geoengineering-could-spark-droughts-and-hurricanes-study-warns) over India and the African Sahel region. Net-zero schemes are being created by and for corporations and governments in Global North countries who have long seen people in the Global South—especially people of color, Indigenous people, women and low-income communities—as expendable, exploitable and inconsequential. Everything we know about net-zero schemes points to the same attitude toward these communities, with similar negative impacts there.

**3. Extracting and Burning Fossil Fuels Gets a Green Light with Net-Zero.**

Getting to net-zero doesn’t require us to stop looking for, extracting and burning fossil fuels—a major driver of the climate crisis. It might require some reduction, but it would definitely not keep fossil fuels in the ground where they belong. Overwhelming scientific evidence makes it clear [we don’t have much time](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/04/tropical-forests-losing-their-ability-to-absorb-carbon-study-finds) to make significant changes—and continuing to rely on fossil fuels to power our lives just doesn’t add up.

In short, aiming for net-zero is a far cry from getting to the roots of the climate crisis. It certainly does nothing to shift an unjust economy that relies on unlimited extraction and burning of fossil fuels for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many. Without getting to the root of the problem, we will never truly solve it.

Instead, we need to be taking all of the resources and political will currently trained at net-zero schemes, and pour them into the implementation of real solutions. We only need to look at the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic around the world to see that, when pushed by circumstance and popular demand, governments can take rapid, previously unimaginable changes. For example, some governments moved quickly to put policies to protect people's lives and well beings: from moratoriums on evictions and water and other utility shutoffs, to housing people without homes in available housing, to providing steps toward universal basic income.

But the pandemic, as well as the global uprisings in defense of Black lives, has also made clear that half-measures are not enough. Systemic racism and the deep economic disparities that are resulting in Black people dying in disproportionate numbers from the disease in the U.S., the conditions that force low-wage workers to the front lines of the pandemic, and more require an entire re-imagining of our economic and social structures.

Similarly, half measures are not enough for the climate crisis. We need [systemic change](https://docs.google.com/document/d/19J6SYSo-qZapnSUhwNYzngY3w8LvtzN7wtz3AAag7Tw/edit?usp=sharing&urp=gmail_link), and it’s absolutely possible to achieve it. There are [real solutions](https://www.peoplesdemands.org/) out there. They have been developed and led by communities who have been dealing with the climate crisis for decades—and who have done the least to cause it.

Such solutions are rooted in a balanced, respectful relationship with nature, rather than a domineering and exploitative one. They respect the knowledge and expertise of Indigenous people. They put women at the forefront of change. They improve the quality of life. They are more practical and better-rooted in how humans can actually keep living and working toward ensuring a healthy planet. And they drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions. A few of these solutions include:

* Keeping fossil fuels in the ground while enabling a just transition to 100 percent renewable energy sources (ensuring workers are able to move to new, secure green jobs).
* Curbing destructive industrial agriculture and promoting “[agro-ecological](https://civileats.com/2018/04/24/agroecology-is-advancing-around-the-globe-will-the-us-take-part/)” practices—agricultural practices that take into account the entire ecosystem, which is proven to capture carbon, provide stable livelihoods and promote ecological diversity.
* Preserving natural forests, which naturally absorb carbon.

The conversation we should be having is not whether BP, Shell, or any corporation or government pledging to become net-zero is serious about it. The conversation we should be having is how quickly and justly we can move to an economy that does not rely at all on the extraction and burning of fossil fuels and is rooted in racial, gender, and economic justice. Some call that “real zero.” Some call it impossible. I call it the only real future we have.