

Daily Updates from Adam Vaughan, at the New Scientist – 17.11.2021

Hello and welcome to *New Scientist's* newsletter covering events at the COP26 climate change summit in Glasgow.

This is our final email on the outcome of the summit, but if you'd like to stay informed on the efforts to tackle climate change, you should subscribe to our magazine. Here's [a link to a great limited discount](#) where you can get one year's access to *New Scientist* (includes print, online, app and lots more subscriber benefits) for just £99. That's a huge saving on the standard subscription price of £234. Overseas offers are also available.

Is the 1.5°C goal still alive? The answer is a good way to boil down the mind-boggling complexity of whether the COP26 summit, which finished in dramatic fashion last Saturday, puts humanity on the path that climate science calls for.

Six years ago in Paris, 195 countries committed to this temperature goal as their line in the sand for limiting future global warming, in addition to holding it “well below” 2°C. Yet the emissions-cutting plans put forward in 2015 left the world facing a cataclysmic 3.5°C of warming by 2100.

That is why nations in Paris also agreed a “ratchet mechanism” to upgrade the plans by the end of 2020. Many missed the deadline, so COP26 in Glasgow, UK, became the de facto cut-off point.

This first crank of the ratchet yielded a mixed bag of plans. Some big emitters, including the European Union, Japan, the UK and the US, significantly deepened how much they say they will cut emissions by the end of the decade. China and India upped their ambition, but their emissions will still rise this decade. Many other sizeable polluters, including Australia, Brazil and Indonesia, didn't issue improved plans.

The net result leaves us in a better position, but one that is still nowhere near good enough: an Earth about 2.4°C hotter than pre-industrial times, according to an authoritative analysis by [Climate Action Tracker](#), a non-profit scientific body in Germany, that assumes countries deliver on their 2030 emissions targets.

That is why the inconspicuous paragraph 29 of the newly forged Glasgow Climate Pact, gavelled in late on Saturday, is so crucial. It requests countries submit stronger plans next year for how much they plan to curb emissions by 2030. And those plans must also be aligned with the 1.5°C goal, a more precise and tougher requirement than the pre-COP26 commitment for a “progression” in successive plans.

The question now is: will countries cough up new plans? The UK, which is already committed to a steep 68 per cent emissions cut by 2030, is unlikely to do more. Australia, Brazil and the Philippines have national elections next year, so citizens could elect leaders with a mandate to go further.

[Corinne Le Quéré](#) at the University of East Anglia, UK, says the package of pledges in Glasgow keeps the 1.5°C goal alive, but only just. “*The language is really important. Every*

word has been ramped up to a level above what it was before,” she says. The target is alive but “*hanging by a thread*”, says Chris Stark at the Climate Change Committee, an independent body that advises the UK government. COP26 president Alok Sharma has said 1.5°C remains alive, but even he concedes its “*pulse is weak*”.

Negotiators in Glasgow also set a precedent by referring directly to coal and to fossil fuel subsidies in the final agreement. This is the first time this has happened in 26 years of UN climate summits. India’s last-minute weakening of the language used, from a “phase-out” of coal to a “phase-down”, doesn’t really matter, says [Emma Pinchbeck](#) at trade group Energy UK. It still sends a “*really, really powerful market signal*”, especially to investors, she says. “*This is the first time the F-word [fossil fuels] is in a COP decision. It’s progress,*” says Mohamed Adow at think tank [Power Shift Africa](#).

There were many other successes. A pledge to double the money given to help lower-income countries adapt to climate change, such as by building flood defences or planting new crops, to \$40 billion by 2025. A decision to work out a global adaptation goal and finance for poorer countries post-2025. Agreement on the “Paris rulebook”, a group of rules on everything from transparency to carbon markets that have remained unresolved for six years.

But new rules, a promise to come back next year (to COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt) and woolly language on coal won’t satisfy many people rightly anxious about the urgency of climate action. Still, the outcome exceeded the expectations of many veteran observers who spoke to *New Scientist*, including Le Quéré. “*There is a mismatch between what perhaps the broader public and the young people think you can achieve in a COP,*” she says. “*You don’t achieve everything in a COP.*”

Critically, COP26 has maintained momentum on climate action and even explicitly spelled out the challenge: “recognizing” that restricting warming to 1.5°C means a global 45 per cent emissions cut by 2030, on 2010 levels. Governments must now translate their pledges into policies and action, an area where even climate leaders like the UK have been found wanting.

Ultimately, UN climate summits alone can only do so much. The battle to keep 1.5°C alive will be won at ballot boxes, on the streets, in courts and in boardrooms. Campaigner Greta Thunberg, who was disappointed by COP26’s outcome, tweeted: “[*Instead of looking for hope – start creating it.*](#)”

This is Adam Vaughan, signing off. If you'd like to receive regular updates on the advances in science and technology that are helping us tackle climate change, sign up for our free Fix the Planet newsletter.

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