

CLIMATE SCIENCE OBJECTIVES: THE BACKGROUND TO THE ONGOING UN CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES ('COP 25')

The UK's legislative commitment to achieve Net Zero Greenhouse Gas 'GHG' emissions by 2050 came into force on 27 June 2019. This was a world leading commitment, and is already having a ripple effect, along with the latest climate science, in prompting other legislatures to consider what is possible, and necessary. On 28 November 2019, the European Parliament declared a climate emergency and called on the new European Commission to ensure that all legislative and budgetary proposals were aligned with the objective of limiting global warming to under 1.5 degrees celsius.

However, the evidence from climate science is become increasingly stark and urgent.

The World Meteorological Organisation reported on 25 November 2019 that globally averaged concentrations of Carbon Dioxide reached 407.8 parts per million in 2018. WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas declared:

"...the last time the Earth experienced a comparable concentration of CO₂ was 3-5 million years ago. Back then, the temperature was 2-3 degrees warmer, sea level was 10-20 metres higher than now."

The UN Environment Programme's '[UNEP Emissions Gap Report](#)', published on 26 November 2019, stated that GHG emissions rose at a rate of 1.5% per year in the last decade. Fossil CO₂ emissions from energy use and industry rose 2% in 2018. There was no sign of GHG emissions peaking in the next few years. Dramatic strengthening of countries' Nationally Determined Contributions ('NDCs') made under the Paris Agreement is needed in 2020. Countries must increase their NDC ambitions threefold to achieve well below the 2 degrees celsius goal, and more than fivefold to achieve the 1.5 degrees celsius goal.

In the next year, we are going to hear much more, and in much greater detail, about the scale of the changes needed to our economy and our society in order to achieve the targets to which we are now legally committed. Engineering reports suggest that these will involve new nuclear power stations, major increases in offshore wind, the deployment of Carbon Capture and Storage with CCGT power stations, the development of a Hydrogen economy, the replacement of all petrol and diesel transportation and the replacement of all oil and gas domestic heating. Change on that scale is going to need a massive exercise in public engagement to ensure public support, taking nothing for granted.

That is the background to the task facing [the UN Conference of the Parties](#) ('COP 25') in Madrid on 2-13 December 2019, and the 30,000 delegates and 200 world leaders expected to attend COP 26 in Glasgow in November 2020, which the UK and Italy will co-host.

In the next article in this series, we will look more closely at the lead up to COP 26, and what the UK needs to do to ensure its success.

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About the Author

William Wilson is a specialist environmental, regulatory and nuclear lawyer with over 25 years experience in government, private practice and consultancy. He worked as a senior lawyer at the UK Department of the Environment/DETR/DEFRA, and helped to build up the environmental and nuclear practices at another major law firm, as well as running his own environmental policy consultancies. William has experience of all aspects of environmental law, including water, waste, air quality and industrial emissions, REACH and chemicals regulation, environmental protection, environmental permitting, litigation, legislative drafting, managing primary legislation, negotiating EU Directives and drafting secondary legislation.

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