

Persistent emissions signal global climate goal out of reach



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While global carbon emissions growth is slowing, the persistent rise is a warning that governments aren't doing enough to stave off the worst consequences of climate change, according to a new report.

Carbon-dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels likely increased by 0.6% this year, down from 2.1% in 2018, according to a report from the Australia-based Global Carbon Project. Declines in the US and Europe were offset by increases in the fast-growing economies of China and India, it said.

"Current climate and energy policies are not enough to reverse the trends in global emissions," the report's authors said in a press release. "Continued support for low-carbon technologies need to be combined with policies directed at phasing out the use of fossil fuels."

The warning comes as envoys from nearly 200 countries gather this week for UN-organised climate talks, aimed at implementing the 2015 Paris Agreement to limit fossil fuel pollution, and as a global protest movement calling for tougher action on climate change gathers momentum. The global climate outlook is "bleak" and the planet's pathway back to a safe climate is narrowing, the UN warned last week.

The increasingly dire estimates about the pace of climate change are leading to calls for more extreme solutions than the actions that nations have already committed to.

The slowdown in global emissions growth was still significant, Canadell said. Given the margin of error in the projection, an actual decline could not be ruled out, he added.

“It’s never good news when emissions go up, but it’s still not as bad as I had feared,” said Corinne Le Quere, professor of climate science at the University of East Anglia and a member of the GCP.

The GCP results were published in three different journals: an atlas of international emissions in Environmental Research Letters, an analysis of emissions by fuel type in Nature Climate Change and a planetary overview in Earth System Science Data.

Coal use accounted for 42% of global emissions from fossil fuels, but its importance in power generation is on the wane. In the US, an abundant supply of cheap natural gas is helping accelerate the transition away from the dirtiest fuel.

At the same time, increased gas use was an important driver of emissions growth in 2019, Canadell said.

China’s emissions growth is projected at 2.6% this year, similar to the pace in 2017 and 2018 and the nation is catching up with European emissions on an individual basis at about 6.7 tonnes per person per year. India’s increase is expected to ease to around 1.8% from 8% last year, due to an economic slowdown and a particularly wet monsoon season, which saw strong hydropower generation displace some coal-fired generation.

“The failure to mitigate global emissions, despite positive progress on so many aspects of climate policy, suggests that the full bag of policy options is not being effectively deployed,” the report said.