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Headline: Fossil fuel 'phase out' put on table for COP28 climate talks

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Smoke rises from chimneys at a factory in the port of Dunkirk, France January 19, 2023. REUTERS

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DUBAI — Countries at the United Nations' COP28 climate conference are considering calling for a phase-out of fossil fuels as part of the summit's final deal, according to a draft negotiating text seen on Tuesday.

Research published on Tuesday showed global carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels are set to hit a record high this year, exacerbating climate change and fueling more destructive extreme weather.

A draft of what could be the final agreement from COP28, published by the U.N. climate body, kicks off negotiations around what is considered the summit's defining issue: whether countries will agree to eventually end the use of fossil fuels.

The draft text includes three options, which delegates from nearly 200 countries will now consider.

The first option in the draft is listed as "an orderly and just phase-out of fossil fuels". In U.N. parlance, the word "just" suggests wealthy nations with a long history of fossil fuel burning would phase out faster than poorer countries that are developing their resources now.

The second option calls for "accelerating efforts towards phasing out unabated fossil fuels". A third option would be to avoid mentioning a fossil fuel phase-out.

The United States, the 27 countries of the European Union and climate-vulnerable small island states are pushing for a fossil fuel phase-out to drive the deep CO2 emissions reductions scientists say are needed this decade to avert disastrous climate change.

"We're not talking about turning the tap off overnight," German Climate Envoy Jennifer Morgan said. "What you're seeing here is a real battle about what energy system of the future we are going to build together."

Major oil and gas producers including Saudi Arabia and Russia have resisted past proposals for a phase-out.

Russia's energy ministry and Saudi Arabia's government communications office did not respond to requests for comment on their positions.

On Monday, United Arab Emirates' COP28 President Sultan Al-Jaber on insisted that he respected the science of climate change, and said a fossil fuel phase out was "inevitable".

"I have said over and over that the phase down and the phase out of fossil fuels is inevitable, that it is essential," Jaber, who is also CEO of state-owned oil firm ADNOC, told reporters.

The Global Carbon Budget report, published on Tuesday said that CO2 emissions from coal, oil and gas are still rising, driven by India and China.

Countries are expected to emit a total 36.8 billion metric tons of CO2 from fossil fuels in 2023, a 1.1% increase from last year, the report by scientists from more than 90 institutions including the University of Exeter concluded.

The world's overall emissions for this year, which reached a record high last year, have plateaued in 2023 due to a slightly better use of land, including a decline in deforestation. Emissions including land use are set to total 40.9 billion tons this year.

China's fossil fuel emissions rose after it lifted COVID-19 restrictions, while India's rise was a result of power demand growing faster than its renewable energy capacity, leaving fossil fuels to make up the shortfall.

The year's emissions trajectory pulls the world further away from preventing global warming exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial times.

"It now looks inevitable we will overshoot the 1.5C target of the Paris Agreement," said Exeter Professor Pierre Friedlingstein, who led the research.

"Leaders meeting at COP28 will have to agree rapid cuts in fossil fuel emissions even to keep the 2C target alive," he said.

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