

ENVIRONMENT

UN says carbon emissions gap could affect climate target



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Investing in cleaner technology can reverse the emissions trend. File | Photo Credit: AP

Paris Agreement pledges leave deficit that could raise temperature by 3°C

The UN Environment Emissions Gap Report 2017 warns that a big carbon emissions gap exists between the levels that can be achieved in 2030 with present climate commitments, and what needs to be done using set pathways to limit increases in global average temperature to less than 2° Celsius or a more ambitious 1.5° C by the year 2100.

The report says full implementation of the unconditional Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and comparable action afterwards “could result in a temperature increase of about 3.2° C by 2100 relative to pre-industrial levels”, while full implementation of conditional NDCs would marginally lower that projection by about 0.2°C.

The breaching of the safe limits that is possible even with current climate commitments – the NDCs that form the core of the Paris Agreement – indicates that governments will need to deliver much stronger pledges to cut greenhouse gas emissions when they are revised in 2020, said the report released ahead of the 23Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC in Bonn, commencing on November 6.

Fossil fuels and cement production account for about 70% of greenhouse gases, the report noted. The alarming number and intensity of extreme weather events in 2017, such as hurricanes, droughts and floods, add to the urgency of early action, it said.

Several green options

The report reveals a large gap between targeted 2030 emission levels and those consistent with least expensive pathways to the 2°C and 1.5°C goals. The 2°C emissions gap for the full implementation of both the conditional and unconditional NDCs for 2030 is 11 to 13.5 gigatonne CO₂ equivalent (GtCO₂e). The gap in the case of the more ambitious 1.5°C target is 16 to 19 GtCO₂e. Should the U.S. follow through with its threat to leave the Paris Agreement in 2020, the picture could become bleak.

The Paris accord pledges only a third of what is needed to avoid climate catastrophe, and adopting new technologies in key sectors, at investments of under \$100 per tonne of emissions, could cut them by up to 36 gigatonnes per year by 2030, which is more than sufficient to bridge the current gap.

A large part of the potential to close the emissions gap lies in solar and wind energy, efficient appliances and passenger cars, afforestation and stopping deforestation. These six factors hold a total potential of up to 22 GtCO₂e per annum, the report says. Strong action on plugging other greenhouse gases, such as hydrofluorocarbons, through the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, and other short-lived climate pollutants such as black carbon, could contribute.

“One year after the Paris Agreement entered into force, we still find ourselves in a situation where we are not doing nearly enough to save hundreds of millions of people from a miserable future,” Erik Solheim, head of UN Environment, said in a media release.

CO₂ emissions have remained stable since 2014, driven in part by renewable energy, notably in China and India.

This has raised hopes that emissions have peaked. But, the report warns that other greenhouse gases, such as methane, are still rising, and a global growth spurt could send CO₂ emissions upward.

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