

THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHAPE A

FOSSIL-FREE FUTURE

BRIEFING BY FRIENDS OF THE
EARTH EUROPE

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**Friends of
the Earth
Europe**

THE CASE AGAINST FOSSIL GAS AND THE URGENCY OF A PHASE-OUT IN EUROPE

The European Union stands at a critical juncture in its energy and climate policy. The relentless **march of climate change** has **underscored the urgent need** for transformative action. Nothing short of a full fossil fuel phase-out will allow Europe to stand firmly on the path to **climate neutrality and to deliver on its own emissions reduction commitments**.

Fossil gas is a major driver of the climate crisis, with its harmful impacts on both people and the planet becoming increasingly apparent. **Any continued use of gas**, even with carbon capture and storage (CCS) or to produce fossil-based hydrogen, **leads Europe astray from climate neutrality** and further **endangers European energy security** by deepening our dependence on a **polluting and volatile fuel**. By phasing out fossil gas no later than 2035[1], the EU can and should lead the global charge towards a **sustainable, renewable energy future**. The **stakes are high**, but the potential **rewards**—a healthier planet, a more just society, and a robust, resilient economy—**are within our grasp**.

FOSSIL GAS EQUALS CLIMATE CHAOS

Fossil gas serves us a climate crisis cocktail: burning it results in CO₂, **the single largest cause of climate change**, and in its raw form it is primarily made up of **methane, the second largest** cause of climate change. In 2021, **CO₂** resulting from **burning gas** accounted for about **a third of Europe's total CO₂[2] emissions**. Meanwhile, methane is even **more dangerous**, with a global warming potential 86 times greater than that of CO₂ over a 20-year period.

In order to capture the real impact of gas, we must therefore **consider the entire life-cycle** (extraction, treatment, distribution and consumption), which is riddled with potential **methane leaks**. Expert calculations show that systems with a leakage rate as low as 0.2% bring gas on par with coal in terms of climate impact[3].

While leakages have historically proven difficult to track, recent monitoring efforts show that **leaks are more frequent and more intense** than previously thought, with detected gas leak rates reported in the same study varying from 0.65% to 66.2%. The International Methane Emissions Observatory recorded over 600 large methane emission events from oil and gas operations in Europe in less than 11 months. With every event, over 10,000 kilograms of methane spilled into the atmosphere[4].

Fossil gas is so inherently dangerous to our climate from the moment that it is extracted and then throughout transportation and burning, that no **mitigation effort can 'cleanse' it or justify its continued use**.

We **witnessed the catastrophic** effects of fossil fuel burning and the ensuing climate crisis throughout 2024: the **summer heat waves** that spared almost no country in the EU[5], followed by **floods** in September in Central Europe that were made twice more likely by climate change[6]. We also saw a record 12 consecutive months of **global temperature reaching 1.5°C above pre-industrial times**[7].

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This is yet another **alarming sign** that we are on a fast track towards climate catastrophe. Scientists are sounding the alarm about a potential 'semi-dystopian future' with global heating reaching 2.5°C or more[8].

This grim scenario stands in **contrast with the commitments and aspirations of the international community** almost a decade ago, when the Paris Agreement was signed at COP21[9]. If that moment was "*a lifeline, a last chance to hand over to future generations a world that is more stable, a healthier planet, fairer societies*" - in the words of a previous European Commission President[10] -, it is difficult not to think it has been **squandered**. The aim of holding the increase in global average temperature "*well below 2°C*" becomes ever **more elusive with every day where Europe turns a blind eye** to its fossil **gas addiction**; the promise to pursue efforts "*to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C*" rings more hollow with every meeting EU decision-makers take with the **fossil fuel industry**, allowing them to **subvert climate action**.

We have so far **failed to act quickly** enough and take the **transformative actions that Europe** and the planet need. We are yet to live up to the EU's own **legally binding commitments**.

The European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change (ESABCC) has warned recently that the **EU needs to accelerate the rate of greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reductions if it is to achieve its targets for 2030** and for climate neutrality by 2050[11].

The EU's carbon and GHG budgets are running out. **Carbon and GHG budgets are a climate policy tool** that calculate the **total amount of CO2 or GHG** that can be **emitted while still staying within a certain temperature** increase limit. As of January 2023, the remaining global carbon budget for a **50% chance of keeping warming to 1.5 °C was around 250 GtCO2** - or otherwise around six years of current CO2 emissions[12]. Dividing the budget into regional shares is **not merely a mathematical question; there is an important ethical dimension** that cannot be ignored.

Principles such as fairness and justice must underpin these calculations. Under certain estimates based on criteria such as ability to pay or historical emissions, the **EU has already exhausted its fair share of the budget**[13].

Numerous reports and analyses make it clear that **new gas projects cannot be approved** if we are to stay on track for the climate targets that the EU has committed to. Over 3 years ago, the **International Energy Agency** had already pointed out that there was **no room for any new oil and gas fields in a pathway to climate neutrality**[14]. Yet the EU has since seen new gas projects being developed within its own borders[15]. While **national authorities carry the largest share of responsibility for approving such reckless projects, a clear EU phase out date would have gone a long way in preventing them** by sending a strong political and market signal.

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THE BROADER IMPACTS OF FOSSIL GAS

FOSSIL GAS EQUALS SECURITY RISKS

Fossil gas has been recently **touted as a solution** to the question of energy security, but in **reality, it only exacerbates the problem**. Relying on fossil gas ties energy systems to volatile global markets, geopolitical tensions, finite resources, and makes them dependent on the exploitation of local communities. The invasion of **Ukraine is a recent illustration of the shocks to which Europe remains exposed as long as it relies on fossil fuels**: the price of gas increased five-fold after the start of the conflict[16]. The EU is merely kicking the can down the road trying to diversify gas imports and infrastructure, **delaying the actions needed to provide solutions** for a secure and sustainable energy future. The focus should instead be on increasing the flexibility of energy systems through demand response, enhanced energy storage capacity, and support and integration of renewable energy sources. **True energy security lies in the adoption of sustainable, renewable sources** like wind and solar, which are abundant, resilient, **and not subject to the same supply constraints** and environmental risks as fossil gas.

FOSSIL GAS EQUALS ENERGY POVERTY

Energy poverty is a **structural issue in a capitalist system dependent on fossil fuels**. While European consumers pay over **200 billion euros** per year for our fossil gas addiction[17] and fossil companies enjoy windfall profits from societal crises, over **40 million Europeans** are unable to keep their houses adequately warm[18].

This problem is **exacerbated by the volatility of fossil gas prices**, which disproportionately affects those in **precarious circumstances**. Additionally, as higher-income households transition to electrified lifestyles, **lower-income households could be left to bear** the increasing costs of maintaining outdated gas grids, further deepening energy poverty. This is a **profound injustice** that must be anticipated and **actively addressed**.

The most common **band-aid solution** that governments resort to against energy poverty are **energy price subsidies**, which may provide temporary relief but **do not fix the underlying disease**. Moreover, they are often **not properly targeted to those who would need them the most**. Incentives and subsidies for **renovations and energy efficiency upgrades** are sorely needed to deliver enhanced wellbeing and welfare, **while decreasing overall energy consumption**. Coupled with a switch to renewable energy, this is the economically sound, socially just and environmentally sustainable path out of energy poverty. This **solution must explicitly exclude gas**, which only perpetuates dependency on a polluting fuel with **volatile prices while worsening the climate crisis**.

FOSSIL GAS EQUALS STRANDED ASSETS

Investing in new **gas projects at this point is economically unsound** given the climate urgency and comparatively slow return on investment from gas. **We cannot afford to waste resources on outdated and harmful technologies**.

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Gas pipelines, LNG terminals and gas-fired power plants all have a **technical lifetime of several decades, while the focus of the next few years must be on decommission planning**. The operation of any new infrastructure will have to end before its technical lifetime in order for Europe to keep its commitments and stave off the worst of the climate crisis. The ESABCC points to the ambiguous stance of the EU towards **fossil gas as a culprit for costly infrastructural and institutional lock-ins**. This not only perpetuates GHG emissions, but also, as they state, *"implies additional costs linked to stranded assets, energy imports and carbon capture infrastructure"*[19]. Ultimately, **new gas projects spell financial loss for Europe**.

FOSSIL GAS EQUALS A COSTLY DISTRACTION

Well-aware of their own potential losses, fossil gas companies are attempting to distract us from the need for an **urgent phase out by flaunting the promises of false solutions such as carbon capture and hydrogen**. The ESABCC's own assessment highlights that the fossil industry **overestimates** both the expected hydrogen **demand and availability of carbon capture capacity**[20]. They even specifically point out the risk that the EU remains locked into fossil gas dependency in the – likely – case that the high industry predictions for green hydrogen are not met. **Meanwhile, this diverts funds and attention from real solutions. Every investment in gas is an investment not made in renewable energy**.

Relying on fossil gas inhibits investment in renewable technologies and sustainable projects. Investments in gas infrastructure divert financial resources from true solutions, **leading to technological stagnation and missed opportunities for progress**.

FOSSIL GAS EQUALS CORPORATE CAPTURE AND DECEIT

For decades, gas industry associations have employed false narratives to influence climate policy[21]. Their **arguments contradict science-based recommendations**, including those from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and have served to systematically **oppose, weaken, and delay the energy transition since at least the late 1960s**. And this continues today. The International Association of Oil and Gas producers (IOGP) Europe is still calling on EU decision makers to *"encourage exploration activities to discover additional resources which may come online in 5-10 years"*[22] This goes **against expert and scientific advice, against climate justice and against the best interest of Europeans**. Yet they are still invited in to the corridors of power to shape our energy future. In the EU, the gas industry is for example tasked with developing Ten-Year Network Development Plans (TYNDP), which provide an **overview of the future gas needs**. This feeds into infrastructure planning and investment decisions; it is of course the fossil fuel companies that are then hired to deliver on projects and reap the benefits of a gas demand that they projected.

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It is not only civil society, but also the EU's own bodies that have criticized TYNDPs for **overestimating expected gas demand** (ACER)[23] and underestimating CO2 emissions from the planned projects, including with an overreliance on CCUS and hydrogen (ESSABCC)[24]. This has a **distorting impact** on EU planning and endangers EU climate targets.

The fossil fuel companies have **enjoyed a baffling level of access and influence** over EU decision-making. Point in case, the industry task force set up after the invasion of Ukraine to advise on "*feasible measures*", which was set up after a meeting between the Commission President and the six big fossil gas companies - Shell, BP, Total, ENI, E.ON and Vattenfall[25]. Additionally, the 2019-2024 von der Leyen Commission had almost 900 reported meetings with fossil fuel lobbyists, the equivalent of one meeting per workday[26]. Given the pressing need and the responsibility that the EU carries to phase out all **fossil fuels** as soon as possible and no later than 2035, it is **inadmissible for this polluting and destructive industry to continue capturing the EU decision-making process**.

FOSSIL GAS EQUALS ENDANGERED HEALTH

Fossil gas has a direct impact on health via air pollution. The main pollutant to consider when it comes to **gas burning is nitrogen dioxide (NO2)**.

With **88% of Europeans in urban areas being exposed to NO2 levels above the World Health Organisation guidelines**[27], phasing out gas would bring **clear health benefits**. NO2 exposure can not only exacerbate or cause new cases of asthma, but it is also linked to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), lung cancer, preterm birth, and diabetes[28].

These are **linked to premature death, decreased quality of life and human suffering**; they also mean decreased productivity, and increased hospitalisation, medication and overall public health costs. There is therefore a **clear health and economic case** to putting an end to Europe's fossil gas addiction.

In addition, the World Health Organization recognises climate change as "*the single biggest health threat facing humanity*"[29]. While there are a myriad ways in which climate change impacts health, including by **increasing and facilitating the spread of water- and vector-borne diseases, exacerbating chronic conditions and putting a strain on mental health**, perhaps the most obvious link is with **extreme weather events**, such as heatwaves, floods or storms. Research estimates that **extreme weather during the summer in Europe can result in over 60,000 deaths**[30]. Phasing out climate-warming gas is therefore **doubly relevant for health**.

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FOSSIL GAS EQUALS SACRIFICING HUMAN RIGHTS

Fossil gas extraction is frequently linked to human rights violations and large-scale corruption, with those who resist encountering violence, intimidation, or legal repression. Furthermore, **displacement, exploitation and environmental degradation are often inescapable realities** for the **communities where gas extraction projects are set up**. In the case of Mozambique, gas fields were discovered over a decade ago, and the country has since been experiencing **devastating disruption, with nearly a million people having fled their homes and thousands dead**[31].

Turning a blind eye to human suffering, and despite the rise in socio-environmental conflicts over the past decade, as local communities around the globe increasingly oppose extractive activities[32], **the EU has been incentivising new gas production outside its borders**. For example, the External Energy Engagement Strategy 2022 supports gas extraction in Africa destined for EU consumption[33]. The disconnect that often exists between extraction zones and places of consumption cannot be used as a veil allowing such injustices to happen out of sight and out of mind. **EU leaders are morally responsible for the consequences of extractivist activities carried out to sustain EU's dependence on fossil fuels**.

FOSSIL GAS EQUALS ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION

The process of **extracting and transporting fossil gas often leads to the disruption and destruction** of the local habitat and environment. The land clearance needed for the buildout of infrastructure can result in the **fragmentation of ecosystems**, leading to **biodiversity loss**. There is also a significant amount of **light pollution** that comes with industrial operations. Light pollution is known to **disrupt natural sleep and reproductive cycles, geographical orientation, and predator-prey relationships**. Sonar sounds during oil and gas exploration and construction noise from infrastructure buildout increase **noise pollution underwater**, to which marine mammals such as whales are particularly sensitive. It impacts their hearing, leading to stress, disrupting feeding, obstructing communication between mothers and calves, and scaring away fish, their primary prey[34]. Such disruptions can have **cascading effects on entire ecosystems**, as species struggle to **adapt to the altered conditions**. In the Gulf of California for example, considered the Aquarium of the World, **whales are currently under threat** due to the potential construction of a mega gas pipeline and increased maritime traffic in the area to transport gas[35]. Furthermore, **air and water pollution are a common concern linked to gas extraction**. These are even further exacerbated when **fracking is used for the extraction**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ENSURE A PHASE OUT OF FOSSIL FUELS AND FOSSIL GAS

A phaseout of fossil fuels, including gas, is imperative if the EU is to **respect its climate commitments and address the global climate crisis effectively**, in a way that reflects its historical responsibility. Moreover, the phase out of gas presents us with an **opportunity to improve health outcomes, increase ecosystem resilience, strengthen community ownership of resources and address the structural causes of energy poverty**. The upcoming discussion on the 2040 emission targets would **ring of hollow ambitions** without being complemented by a gas phase-out inscribed in European law.

SET A CLEAR AND AMBITIOUS PHASE OUT DATE FOR FOSSIL GAS IN EUROPE

The EU must establish a **firm and ambitious deadline for ending the use of fossil gas within its 2040** climate targets, aiming for a complete phaseout in all sectors by 2035 at the latest. Setting a clear **timeline would accelerate the implementation of policies** aimed at transitioning away. It is the lack of a firm date that emboldens the IOGP Europe, in their 2024-2029 manifesto, to ask EU decision-makers to reaffirm *“the long-term role of gas”* and to promote *“long-term gas contracts”*. Imagine tobacco companies demanding a commitment to incorporating cigarette prescriptions into medical treatments. **The IOGP Europe request is unacceptable**; allowing fossil gas to maintain a **long-term role is incompatible** with tangible climate action and environmental protection.

RESIST ATTEMPTS TO KEEP THE GAS INDUSTRY ALIVE

The EU **must resist false solutions** such as Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) and hydrogen, which run the risk of prolonging **reliance on fossil fuels while distracting from reliable, cheap and effective alternatives**, as well as from the need to reduce energy and material consumption overall. The ESABCC highlights that the more efficient path is to focus on phasing out fossil fuel deployment, rather than on lowering fossil fuel emissions with technologies such as CCS[36]. **We cannot afford to be distracted by technologies that only serve to extend the life of fossil fuels.**

STOP FINANCING FOSSIL GAS

The EU must put an end to all subsidies for fossil fuel companies, **closing loopholes that allow for the funding of hydrogen-readiness and other forms of fossil gas in disguise**. Several EU documents have already acknowledged the need for an urgent end to subsidising fossil fuels. The 8th Environment Action Plan calls for a *“phasing out environmentally harmful subsidies, in particular fossil fuel subsidies, at Union, national, regional and local level, without delay”*[37]. With support from all political groups except for the far-right[38], a resolution of the 2019-2024 European Parliament called for an end of **all direct and indirect fossil fuel subsidies**, at national, EU and global levels, *“as soon as possible and by 2025 the latest”*[39].

RECOMMENDATIONS

A 2023 Commission document reads: *“Fossil fuel subsidies remain a major obstacle to the clean energy transition and a drag on the EU’s ability to meet its climate objectives”*[40]. In a recent report the ESABCC has called for fossil fuel subsidies in the EU to be phased out **“urgently and fully”**[41]. **The harm that comes from supporting the fossil gas is well established**, now is the time to take decisive action and end it.

The next **Multiannual Financial Framework can become an important instrument in the fight against climate change by excluding all fossil fuels from receiving European public investments** and supporting truly sustainable and affordable green solutions instead. The EU **cannot approve an MFF** that continues to fall prey to industry **greenwashing of gas** as a transition fuel. Stop financing climate destruction.

END FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY ACCESS TO EU DECISION-MAKING

The EU **must institute a firewall** to protect its decision-making processes from the **undue influence of lobbyists employed by the fossil fuel industry**. The companies that have **brought about and benefited** from environmental destruction and the climate crisis cannot be trusted to shape policies that do more than line their pockets and extend the life of their business model.

There should be no lobby meetings; no seats in expert and advisory bodies; no role in public research bodies. Similar to existing restrictions on tobacco industry lobbyists, we need a **firewall that protects our democratic institutions and our political decision-making** from fossil fuel industry interference.

DEVELOP A CLEAR PATH TO GAS INFRASTRUCTURE DECOMMISSIONING

The only future for gas is decommissioning. We must be **proactively planning for a future fossil-free energy system**. Designing a clear path for decommissioning gas infrastructure will help transition to a **sustainable and clean energy future**. We must plan for an equitable, safe and orderly dismantling and shut down of the fossil fuel infrastructure, and build a **new foundation for a renewable energy future**.

CONCLUSION

Fossil gas is one of the **major contributors to the climate crisis, hurting human and ecosystem health**. It is imperative that Europe leads the way in phasing out gas swiftly and equitably, empowering communities and promoting justice. We count on you to **have the political courage and vision to commit to a gas phase out date, and to seize legislative opportunities such as the 2040 climate targets** and Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to make it into law. We **count on you** to bring about a safe and clean Europe, free from fossil fuels.

The next Multiannual Financial Framework can **become an important instrument in the fight against climate change** by excluding all fossil fuels from receiving European public investments and supporting truly **sustainable and affordable green solutions instead**. The EU cannot approve an **MFF that continues to fall prey to industry greenwashing of gas as a transition fuel**. Stop financing climate destruction.

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