

UN Secretary-General Calls for the End of the Fossil Fuel Era

By Don Sutherland

In The Water Will Come, Jeff Goodell wrote:

The real x factor...is not the vagaries of climate science, but the complexity of human psychology. At what point will we take dramatic action to cut CO2 pollution? Will we spend billions on adaptive infrastructure to prepare cities for rising waters—or will we do nothing until it is too late?

To date, 2023 has been another year of climate change-driven extremes. Driven by “performance-enhancing” greenhouse gas emissions, the world has seen extreme rainfall in New Zealand delivered by Cyclone Gabrielle, extreme April heat in South Asia and Spain, all-time record heat in Southeast Asia, and seemingly “endless summer” in parts of Southern Africa. During the first 16 days of this month, Beira, Mozambique set 11 daily record high temperatures with 8 days seeing temperatures surpass the previous highest June temperature on record. A record wildfire smoke event brought hazardous conditions to New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. The North Sea has seen water temperatures rise more than 6°C (10.8°F) above normal.

Today is now the 679th day since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) declared that it is “unequivocal” that human activities have warmed the climate. Global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. *Will we do nothing until it is too late?*

Numerous countries have been expanding renewable energy capacity. None have adopted targets for phasing out the burning of fossil fuels, much less binding targets. As a result, the world’s oil and gas companies continue to peddle their opioids of energy onto the world’s people.

The current state of affairs has frustrated young climate activists who will inherit a hotter more unstable climate imposed on them by the fossil fuel industry, shortsighted policymakers, and their advocates—all of whom will have departed the scene long before the worst impacts of climate change descend on today’s youth.

Last Thursday, UN Secretary-General António Guterres bluntly highlighted where the problem lies. In opening remarks for a climate change-related [press conference](#), he told the news media:

I am very worried about where the world stands on climate.

Countries are far off-track in meeting climate promises and commitments.

I see a lack of ambition. A lack of trust. A lack of support. A lack of cooperation. And an abundance of problems around clarity and credibility.

The climate agenda is being undermined.

At a time when we should be accelerating action, there is backtracking.

At a time when we should be filling gaps, those gaps are growing.

He continued:

Limiting the rise in global temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius is still possible.

We must consider this as a moment of hope.

But it will require carbon emissions to be cut by 45% by 2030...

All of this action must be global.

It must be immediate.

And it must start with the polluted heart of the climate crisis: the fossil fuel industry.

Let's face facts.

The problem is not simply fossil fuel emissions.

It's fossil fuels – period.

The solution is clear:

The world must phase out fossil fuels in a just and equitable way -- moving to leave oil, coal and gas in the ground where they belong – and massively boosting renewable investment in a just transition.

Fossil fuel industry transition plans must be transformation plans, that chart a company's move to clean energy – and away from a product incompatible with human survival.

Otherwise, they are just proposals to become more efficient planet-wreckers.

Society has now known about the consequences of greenhouse gas emissions for more than half a century. The magnitude rolling back greenhouse gas emissions, once a modest long-term transition, has now reached the point where a sharp short-term transition is required. On the present trajectory, a disruptive break will be needed.

So, the question today remains: *Will we do nothing until it is too late?*