

EU institutions' operations carbon neutral by 2030 – realistic or green washing?

Current claims by the EU Institutions

The European Commission (EC) stated in its [European Green Deal communication](#) in December 2019 that it is keen to reduce its environmental impact as an institution and it would present a comprehensive action plan in 2020 to become climate neutral by 2030. Yet, it was only in 2022 that the Commission presented its [Greening communication](#) with hoped-for emissions reduction measures in various sectors, but without a timetable or concrete actions on how to achieve its "greening". In only 8 years from now, the EC has promised to have reduced its emissions by 60% compared to 2005 or by 38% compared to 2019. The additional 40% or 62% respectively should come from (still to be defined) carbon removal schemes. However, according to its [2021 Environmental Statement](#), the annual emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) generated by the Commission did not come down between 2013 and 2019. Furthermore, certain EC sites and the travel of subsidised experts were out of scope of this report.

The European [Parliament \(EP\) has claimed to be carbon neutral since 2016](#) based on a questionable annual offsetting programme which is an outdated Kyoto Protocol mechanism. A [Commission study](#) showed that only 2% of the offsets had a high likelihood of ensuring that emissions reductions were additional and not overestimated. The same study concluded that, with the adoption of the Paris Agreement, there was a need to implement more effective climate policies domestically. The [Parliament resolution of 14 May 2020](#) requested a concrete target year for reaching real carbon neutrality. It instructed the EP Bureau to amend its current GHG reduction plan for reaching carbon neutrality by 2030, implicitly asking to achieve this by domestic measures. The 2020 [study 'The Parliament's carbon footprint-towards carbon neutrality'](#), requested by the Parliament's ENVI Committee, described measures that could be applied for such a carbon neutrality by 2030. Similarly to the Commission, the Parliament's GHG emissions, according to its [2021 Environmental Statement](#), remained rather flat between 2013 and 2019, while the sharp decrease in 2020 is attributed to the pandemic only.

The Council of the European Union has not defined a carbon neutrality target. According to its [2021 Environmental Statement](#), and despite its EMAS-related measures, direct emissions of GHGs fluctuated considerably from one year to the next during the last decade (2010-2019) without showing any signs of decreasing.

Some of [the other European Institutions and bodies](#) (the agencies, offices, centres, foundations, etc.) are implementing EMAS environmental management systems (EMS) aiming to reduce their GHG emissions over several years. Together with the three main institutions, there are currently eighteen EU institutions and bodies with an EMS in place, representing approximately 61,000 staff or 81% of all EU staff. However, it is very difficult to directly compare the carbon footprint of EU Institutions and bodies, as they are using different methods and metrics to calculate their emissions.

IN BRIEF

- Too little, too late for the EU Institutions' actions to reduce their own GHG emissions
- A strict timetable and concrete measures urgently need to be implemented to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030
- We propose actions to the EU institutions to make such a target feasible and make a fair contribution to the overall EU effort to address climate change

What needs to be done – conclusion

EU Staff for Climate, in its 2019 petition to the incoming leaders of the three major EU institutions, called on them to lead by example and 'make the EU institutions' operations carbon neutral by 2030'. The petition asked them to target 'in particular buildings, business travel, catering, meetings, procurement and local mobility'. It also specified that this needs to be achieved by using carbon budgets for all operations, targeting the most polluting operations first and restricting them accordingly, using new technologies, and engaging the staff on the changes we have to make.

Although the EU has a long history of being a pioneer in developing policies to tackle climate change, it is of paramount importance to also lead by example and make the EU institutions' operations carbon neutral by 2030. At a time when [many corporations are exaggerating their climate action](#) through greenwashing, a [report](#) produced by NewClimate Institute in collaboration with Carbon Market Watch recommends that governments must prevent corporations from making 'net zero' and 'carbon neutral' claims and instead report absolute emission reductions. Similar results by the Commission's [screening of websites for greenwashing](#) have found that half of green claims lack evidence.

Equally, the EU Institutions must be transparent, accurate and realistic towards reaching their own climate claims. Despite the significant efforts from the EMAS actions during the last decade, the GHG emissions of the three main institutions have failed to come down. Any past or future claim for carbon neutrality needs to be double-checked and properly reviewed.

EU Staff for Climate demands that EU Institutions and bodies:

- **report absolute emission reductions** from a real and recent emissions baseline, including all sources of their emissions and to not report emission reductions per capita which mask their true impact on climate; **revise the 2009 EMAS regulation** according to which, the reporting of the carbon footprint should be in relation to the size of the institution for public administrations (such as the EU Institutions), as an increase in personnel could hide an increase in absolute GHG emissions;
- **introduce a cap on its own emissions** consistent with the 'well below 2°C or even 1.5°C' targets of the Paris Agreement; **carbon budget rules** should be applied to all operations of the institutions, while an internal carbon fee accounting mechanism should cover various emission sources, such as travel, commuting, food, energy use, purchase of goods; the use of such a carbon fee would send a strong message: that each institution incentivises **the most climate friendly option**, instead of the most economical one;
- **abstain from making 'net zero' and 'carbon neutral' claims**, which are largely based on carbon credits, instead prioritising actual emissions reductions, as the quality of offset credits continues to be very poor on average, while the carbon removals have the risk of double counting emission reductions; **embrace a policy of switching to renewable energy production**, i.e. the installation of solar panels on all its buildings;
- **engage EU staff** and its climate associations (like EU Staff for Climate) in the ambitious target of decreasing drastically the GHG emissions of the EU institutions, as staff need to understand and embrace the big behavioural change that is required; **ensure** that each employee of the EU Institutions receives **mandatory training on climate change**.