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## **The European Landowners' point of view on COP28**

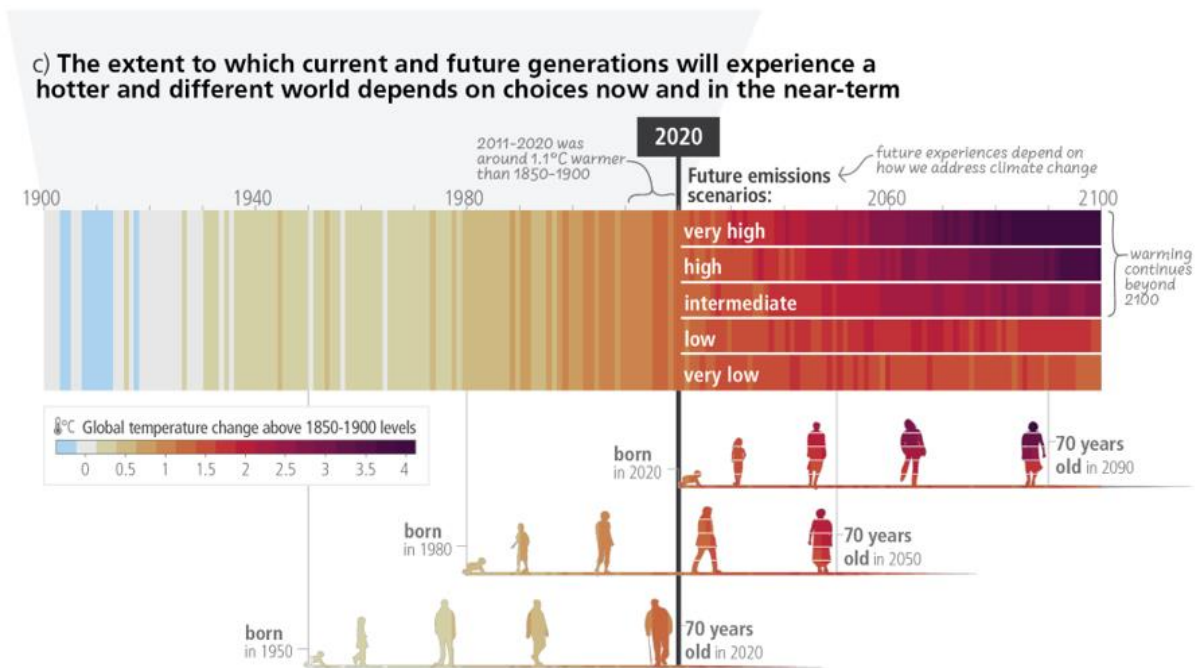
The Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) meets in December against the least promising backdrop for many years, both politically (Ukraine, tensions between US and China, and a widespread feeling that the host country is conflicted) and climatically, since the carbon budget for stabilisation at plus 1.5 degrees as agreed at Paris in 2015 is now less than 250 Gigatonnes (emissions for 2022 were 40 Gt) and almost exhausted. There is a two in three chance of the plus 1.5 limit being breached for at least one year between 2023 and 2027. To this extent, society is already committed to an overshoot with the corresponding need for clawback. Only the rapid growth of renewable electricity (global carbon emissions from electricity might peak this year) offers realistic hope, but without further heroic action, the world faces plus 2.8 degrees of warming.

The weather events of 2023 are indicative of the rapidly deteriorating situation. July, August and June brought record monthly temperatures with periodic daily breaches of the plus 1.5 target. Seven European countries experienced their warmest ever September. Sea temperatures were also above normal. The oncoming El Niño will further amplify the background rise in global temperature.

Wildfires set records, for example in Greece (an EU record), Canada, Maui (the town of Lahaina was eighty per cent destroyed on 9 August, with 97 deaths and 31 people still missing). There was extensive flooding in Italy in the early summer, then in Greece and, especially, in Libya (Derna) with thousands of deaths. At the same time, low flows/winter recharge have affected north Italian rivers, mountain lakes (Titicaca) and inland seas (the Caspian).

In many of these cases, anthropogenic climate change (fundamentally a result of global energy mismanagement) is exacerbated by local land mismanagement and neglect (failure to control invasive grasses on Maui, failure to maintain dams at Derna). Natural disasters in the US alone exceed US\$1bn in damages for the first eight months of 2023.

The speed of change evident in 2023 is faster than anticipated and the risk of reaching climatic tipping point(s) has significantly increased. This is seen in the cryosphere (especially the Antarctic, where it may now be too late to prevent the gradual break-up of the Western Antarctic Ice Sheet, but also Greenland), with a medium risk of a breakdown in the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (the Gulf Stream) in the next century. There are indications that the South American Monsoon may also be approaching a tipping point with major consequences for rainfall in the Amazon, currently experiencing extreme drought.



Source : IPCC, Sixth Assessment, Synthesis, Fig 1.

Meanwhile, governments continue to subsidise fossil fuels. In 2022, differences between efficient price (including environmental cost and direct subsidies) and retail price yielded a global subsidy equivalent to US\$7tn. Of this, US\$1.7tn was in explicit subsidies. (IMF Fossil Fuel Subsidies Data, 2023). For example, fossil fuel typically pays only 5 per cent VAT and aircraft fuel is zero-rated.

The International Energy Authority (IEA) reported in 2021 that coal, oil and natural gas all need to go and its roadmap for net zero (2023) allows for no new oil and gas fields, coal mines or mine extensions or unabated coal plants beyond those approved in 2021, while mining companies will switch to providing critical minerals (copper, cobalt, manganese). By 2050, world energy demand could have reduced by 8 per cent but for an economy twice as big.

Meanwhile, there is a loss of ambition driven by political maneuvering. Shell has scaled back its plans to transition. The UK has rolled back targets and its offshore wind auction failed because the price cap was set too low to be viable for energy companies. It is one of five countries behind half the planned expansion of new oil and gas to 2050. Although deforestation in the Amazon was reduced, thanks to a change of government in Brazil, the world lost 4.1 million ha of primary forest, equivalent to 2.7 million Gt CO<sub>2</sub>, in 2022.

Yet the urgency is widely understood. An ELO Board member from northern Italy writes (July): “We have to accelerate on green energy. To stop carbon emissions and produce green energy has to be the first European goal”.

A growing public loss of confidence in policy drives the current wave of court cases (see also Global Climate Litigation Report, 2023). These include Milieudefensie v. Royal Dutch Shell (brought in The Hague), and very recent cases brought by the State of California against five oil companies, by nine small island states against high emitter countries for an advisory opinion under the International Convention on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) at Hamburg, and by six young people against 32 European states in the ECHR.

These cases are quite separate from the loss and damage mechanism agreed in principle at COP27 last year, where there are demands for the sheer (and continuing) inequality of carbon

use between countries to be addressed.

There is an overriding need to understand the problem in terms of inter-generationality (something which should come naturally to land managers), as investment in the technologies of future rather than past, and the greater security of renewable sources. In this way, the US Inflation Reduction Act (2022) offers an example.

Globally, the oil and gas industry showed record profits of nearly US\$4tn in 2022, up from an average US\$1.5tn on the back of the war in Ukraine (IEA). In addition, methane emissions from energy sources in 2022 were 135 million tonnes. These are measures of the opportunities for energy companies to invest in green technology, for oil states to diversify their economies and for governments to reform tax systems to reward sustainability and not pollution. Put in perspective, it has been calculated (Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, 2023) that Europe could wean itself off fossil fuels by 2040 for a total of US\$2.1tn (€140bn annually to 2030 and €100bn annually to 2040 thereafter). Globally, the investment required in clean energy needs to rise from its current US\$1.8tn to some US\$4.5tn annually by the 2030s.

Under the Paris Agreement, the first global stocktake and revision of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) is now under way. This is the moment to adopt more ambitious targets and to tighten the language of COP26 at Glasgow two years ago. It was already plain then that the industrialised economies need to bring forward net zero. In the EU, only Finland is planning for net zero before 2040.

To offer a realistic scenario at COP 28, the EU needs to lead an alliance to phase out coal in OECD countries by 2030 and oil by 2040. Developing countries should exit coal by 2040 and oil soon after. Deforestation needs to end by 2030 and methane emissions should be reduced by 30 per cent, principally from the energy sector, also by 2030.

The question of 'abated' fossil fuels is critical here. The most permanent carbon sink is the biosphere. One of the biggest risks is that the use of untried carbon capture, usage and storage (CCUS), especially underground storage, to enable higher than necessary levels of fossil fuel use would leave a world in hock to geoengineering.

Agriculture, forestry and land management are profoundly exposed. They also have their own structural problems and their own contribution to make to net zero.

On a 20-year Global Warming Potential, some two-thirds of agricultural emissions in EU-UK are methane from cattle, while two-thirds of cereals are grown for livestock feed. Food waste in the global north runs at over 30 per cent.

Clearly livestock have a central role to play in agriculture and grassland management, but the sector is out of scale, largely a result of the growth of intensive units where the availability of pasture is no longer a limiting factor, and the over-reliance of unviable farms on livestock. A reduction in intensive units combined with a switch of arable land to other food crops, biofuels and mixed afforestation would need to be accompanied by some diet change (to avoid outsourcing emissions) and help for those affected to diversify their farms or reposition within the broader rural economy.

In forestry, there needs to be a more holistic policy focus on the role of harvest and renewables in forest policy. The construction industry is particularly hard to decarbonise and the role of timber in construction can help. "Closer to nature forestry" needs to be understood as dynamic, uneven-aged, continuous cover forestry with mixed species and accompanied by a forest inventory. (Measurement by drones is too crude here.) Mixed afforestation certainly has a role in under-wooded countries.

As the EU leads the way, its Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), expected to be fully in force in 2026 will be necessary to avoid exporting emissions reduced.

The structure of the net zero we should plan for is also crucial. Land-based carbon resources need to be planned, whether as forest, as agroforestry, as soil carbon in farmed lands, or as peatland, all with net zero in mind, so that they can sustain a net zero economy. Offsets should not be used to spin out the transition against the interests of land managers, and especially the next generation of land managers. Only when net zero is reached can the realistic value (price) of Carbon be known.

*Thanks to Professor David Viner for checking this piece.*

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**About the European Landowners' Organization (ELO)**

The European Landowners' Organization (ELO) is a leading voice representing the interests of landowners, rural entrepreneurs, and rural land managers in Europe. ELO promotes sustainable land management practices, fosters innovation, and advocates for the recognition of landowners' crucial role in shaping Europe's landscapes and rural areas.

