SURREY CLIMATE COMMISSION

# Is the term 'net zero' past its sell-by date?

This short blog explores the question: how useful is the term 'net zero' in helping us drive action towards addressing climate change? It was inspired by an article in The Conversation [i] led by James Duke of the University of Exeter. While this article seems to have had little impact since it was published in 2022, when I stumbled across it recently, it was a true light bulb moment. So, if you have noticed that Surrey Climate Commission avoids the words 'net zero' and wondered why, here is the answer!

The basis of the concept of net zero is that carbon can be removed from the atmosphere to counteract carbon that is emitted. This '*burn now, pay later'* offsetting approach acts as a 'get out of jail free' card, that reduces the perceived need and urgency of reducing carbon emissions[i]. It facilitates the belief that we can continue to emit carbon now, and rely on its future removal.

Removal of carbon from the atmosphere is carried out through afforestation, and technologies such as Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) and Bioenergy Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS). However, results from previous modelling exercises have given an unrealistic and inaccurate sense of the potential capacity, resilience and robustness of these technologies for capturing carbon, which is now being increasingly recognised[ii] [iii].

Belief in the future ability to remove carbon emissions through these unproven techniques has led politicians to tell the public that net zero is too expensive at the moment, and that we can delay action. The result is that we have allowed carbon emissions to rise - and they are still are rising. Impacts are being felt across the globe, but we bury our heads in the sand, and continue emitting.

How culpable are the public in letting this happen? Do they, in general, understand what the term 'net zero' means? Research by Britain Talks Climate has shown that it is not well understood. Less than half (48%) the people questioned identified the correct definition of net zero out of the four options they were given to choose from; 33% gave the wrong answer; and 21% said they did not know[iv].

This lack of understanding has, arguably, enabled the politicisation of 'net zero'. While in 2019 the Conservative Government amended the Climate Change Act (2008) to achieve net zero by 2050[v], since then, however, a divide has opened up, with right wing politicians attacking net zero. Nigel Farage has, for example, claimed that 'net stupid zero' is destroying jobs and pushing up household bills[vi], and in March 2025, Kemi Badenoch announced that the Conservative Party would no longer support the UK's 2050 Net Zero target[vii].

So has the term 'net zero' past its sell-by date? The answer is, unequivocably, 'Yes'. Should we reduce emissions as fast as possible? Yes!

We need to face up to the facts: we must radically and urgently reduce carbon emissions now, and not bank on emissions removal at a later date. Removal of carbon from the atmosphere may be viable in the future, but it is too risky to rely on. Therefore we should pursue other mitigation strategies, such as increasing renewables and energy storage, on the premise that carbon removal techniques will not work

at scale[viii]. Crucially, alongside this, we also need to ensure that policies are fair, protecting those on lower incomes.

So Surrey Climate Commission's website does not use the term 'net zero'. However, we strongly advocate initiatives to increase the speed and scale of decarbonisation, and we run projects to make the homes of low income households greener, warmer and cheaper to run.

***Angela Druckman. October 2025***

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[i] Dyke, Watson and Knorr (2021). Climate scientists: concept of net zero is a dangerous trap. https://theconversation.com/climate-scientists-concept-of-net-zero-is-a-dangerous-trap-157368

[ii] Gidden, M. J., S. Joshi, J. J. Armitage, A.-B. Christ, M. Boettcher, E. Brutschin, A. C. Köberle, K. Riahi, H. J. Schellnhuber, C.-F. Schleussner and J. Rogelj (2025). "A prudent planetary limit for geologic carbon storage." Nature 645(8079): 124-132.

[iii] Romm, J., S. Lezak and A. Alshamsi (2025). "Are Carbon Offsets Fixable?" Annual Review of Environment and Resources 50(1): 649-680.

[iv] https://climateoutreach.org/britain-talks-climate/previous-research/net-zero-fairness-politics/

[v] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2019/1056/article/2/made

[vi] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx20znjejw1o

[vii] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/mar/17/conservative-party-to-ditch-commitment-to-net-zero-in-uk-by-2050

[viii] Anderson, K., & Peters, G. (2016). The trouble with negative emissions. Science, 354(3609), 182-183. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aah4567