

How Companies Have Abandoned Their Climate Goals and Let Themselves Off the Hook

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Not so long ago, many of America's biggest companies were making bold promises about saving the planet.

They pledged to stop polluting, get off fossil fuels and use recyclable materials. Some even promised to reinvent their core business practices, speaking aspirationally about a new, more sustainable economy.

These goals were set, and trumpeted, by the companies making the phone in your pocket, the shoes on your feet and the food in your fridge — and others. Coca-Cola, a company that produces [as much plastic trash as any in the world](#), even began talking about “a world without waste.”

Over the past few years, however, many of these environmental commitments have evaporated.

Some companies have changed the way they measure progress. Others postponed their deadlines for making change. One company said its customers simply didn't care about the issue anymore.

Under President Biden, there was extraordinary pressure for big business to address climate change. The Trump administration is now pushing companies to abandon climate goals and encouraging the use of more oil, gas and coal, claiming that environmental initiatives are “woke” distractions that hamper economic growth.

But the waning climate ambition across corporate America often has an even simpler explanation: Many companies have concluded it is simply too difficult and too expensive to drastically reduce planet warming emissions, especially at a moment of rising energy demand.

A number of big corporations are still working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and become better stewards of the environment. Even some of the companies that have retreated on certain fronts continue to make progress in other areas.

Yet after years of ambitious corporate pledges, the business world is now confronted with a quiet retreat by some of the very companies that only recently boasted about their efforts to combat climate change and help the environment.

Here are the ways some of the biggest companies across industries did it.

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Abandoned targets

Many companies have simply acknowledged they've missed the targets they had set for themselves.

In 2020, Walmart said it would slash its greenhouse gas emissions by more than a third within five years

and by almost two-thirds within ten years, from a 2015 base line. But in December 2024, the company acknowledged it would miss the first target.

Although we anticipate missing our 2025 emissions target, our absolute emissions and emissions intensity are down meaningfully from our 2015 baseline.

The company's emissions had actually risen the year before, and [Walmart said](#) that achieving its goals would "require innovation and technology that is not available or economically viable, or fully scalable today."

Walmart also said it would miss its recycling goals.

... without a breakthrough in the cost and availability of recycled content, we do not anticipate meeting our recycled content and virgin material reduction goals.

"Progress is not always straightforward or linear," the Walmart chief sustainability officer, Kathleen McLaughlin, [said at the time](#).

JBS, the world's largest meatpacker, in 2021 said it would eliminate or offset all of its emissions within 20 years, saying that "anything less is not an option."

But last year, after Attorney General Letitia James of New York [sued the company](#), accusing it of making misleading statements about its climate goals, JBS had a new message.

It described its emissions targets as an "aspiration." And, in [an interview with Reuters](#), the company's chief sustainability officer, Jason Weller, said, "It was never a promise that JBS was going to make this happen." JBS, which [settled the lawsuit](#) last year, is [now targeting](#) a 70 percent reduction of emissions by 2050.

Other companies said they simply were no longer trying.

In 2021, Tractor Supply Co., which sells farm products, announced it would redesign its operations so that it [stopped adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere by 2040](#).

But in June 2024, the company backtracked, saying its customers opposed its involvement in social and environmental issues.

"We have heard from customers that we have disappointed them," the company said in [a statement on its website](#). "We have taken this feedback to heart."

Going forward, we will ensure our activities and giving tie directly to our business. For instance, this means we will:

... Withdraw our carbon emission goals and focus on our land and water conservation efforts

Walmart, JBS and Tractor Supply declined to comment for this article.

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Shifted goal posts

When it seemed like ambitious targets might not be met, some companies just moved the goal posts.

In 2021, [Pepsi said](#) it would gradually reduce emissions, with the goal of no longer adding greenhouse gases to the environment by 2040.

“The severe impacts from climate change are worsening, and we must accelerate the urgent systemic changes needed to address it,” Pepsi’s chief executive officer, Ramon Laguarta, said at the time.

But last year, it extended that deadline by a decade.

It also changed the year by which its emissions reductions would be measured to 2022 from 2015. This change was subtle, but since it set a higher base line — emissions were higher in 2022 than in 2015 — it meant the company would have to do nearly 20 percent less to meet the goal.

“Our goals must evolve with us to keep our ambition,” Mr. Laguarta [said](#) upon announcing the change.

Pepsi’s biggest rival did something similar.

Coca-Cola, the world’s biggest soda maker, once aimed to [reduce emissions by a quarter by 2030](#), using a 2015 base line.

But in December 2024, the company reset the clock. It is [now using 2019 as a base line](#) to measure its progress, and is no longer aiming for a specific percentage.

The new target is based on calculations about what the world needs to do to keep average global temperatures from rising more than 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. That’s the threshold beyond which scientists say the catastrophic effects of global warming would be unavoidable. The planet has [already warmed 1.4 degrees](#).

We are taking action to help mitigate the impacts caused by climate change, so we set a target to reduce the company’s emissions in line with a 1.5°C trajectory by 2035, from a 2019 baseline.

Coca-Cola also walked back its packaging commitments. The company’s “World Without Waste” goal initially said its packaging would contain [50 percent recycled material by 2030](#). That was recently downgraded to [35 to 40 percent by 2035](#).

Another food and beverage giant, Kraft Heinz, has also reset its benchmarks. In 2017, the company set an emissions-reduction goal for the end of 2020.

Reducing our environmental footprint, currently defined as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, energy, water and waste-to-landfill by 15 percent by 2020 (vs. a 2015 baseline; per ton of product) across our global manufacturing network, is a priority for Kraft Heinz.

But after a couple years, its emissions had actually increased, so Kraft Heinz restarted the clock.

The company [now is targeting a 50 percent reduction](#) in emissions by 2030, compared with a 2021 base line.

We previously set 2020 intensity targets in water conservation, energy use, greenhouse gas emissions and waste reduction, to reduce by 15 percent per metric ton of product made against a 2015 baseline, that we failed to meet as we contended with former supply chain challenges. ... We recognize the shortcomings in our execution in these areas and we have both identified and learned from the gaps ...

And in 2021, ArcelorMittal, the world’s second-largest steel producer and one of the biggest industrial emitters on the planet, introduced an ambitious target.

In just nine years, it aimed to reduce emissions in Europe by 35 percent, and overall by 25 percent. It aimed to achieve net-zero operations by 2050.

But in the years that followed, progress was slow. This year, ArcelorMittal significantly [lowered its global](#)

[2030 target](#) and dropped the Europe-specific target altogether.

... we now expect to reduce emissions intensity by up to 10% by 2030. Policy is essential to accelerate and enable the economics of decarbonised steelmaking, which realistically are likely to remain challenging in the next decade.

Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Kraft Heinz and ArcelorMittal declined to comment.

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New metrics

Walmart, America's largest retailer, is among the companies that has used another tactic: including new measurements that make it easier to claim progress.

In addition to focusing on its absolute emissions, which continue to climb, Walmart also emphasizes a concept known as "emissions intensity," or emissions per million dollars of revenue.

At a growing company like Walmart, where annual revenues have risen 25 percent over the past five years to \$713 billion, that means more sales lead to a lower "emissions intensity."

Starbucks has also used this approach.

In 2020, the coffee chain said it aimed to [halve its emissions and waste sent to landfills](#) by 2030.

But with those targets looking out of reach, Starbucks quietly dropped that goal and introduced new metrics. On packaging, for example, it began to focus more narrowly on how much of its "customer facing packaging" was "reusable, recyclable, or compostable."

The company also restated its emissions goal, but with a hedge:

We are actively reassessing our 2030 emissions reduction goal stated on page 6 of this report while we evaluate the implications of emerging regulations, ongoing updates to relevant standards and other developments (including headwinds that impose significant challenges for the achievement of the goal).

Starbucks declined to comment.

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Over the 'moonshot'

Six years ago, Google put forth an ambitious plan to run all global operations on carbon-free energy, 24 hours a day, by 2030.

Sundar Pichai, the company's chief executive, [referred to it as a "moonshot" and said](#), "We are the first major company that's set out to do this, and we aim to be the first to achieve it."

But in the years since, it has become clear just how far away Google is from achieving that goal.

Rising energy use from artificial intelligence upended the tech giant's plans to reduce emissions. In 2024, Google [stopped claiming it was carbon neutral](#) after it stopped buying some carbon offsets. Instead, it said it was "focusing on accelerating an array of carbon solutions and partnerships," and began focusing on a longer term goal of becoming "net zero," meaning that it was not adding emissions to the atmosphere.

Yet in its most recent report, Google acknowledged its emissions continue to rise.

“Over the past few years, the rapid rise of AI has reshaped global infrastructure and placed new demands on the grid,” [the company wrote](#). “While our growth has widened the gap between our continued progress and our ambitions, our moonshots have energized our work.”

Other tech companies with ballooning energy use are confronting similar challenges. Amazon in 2019 co-founded the Climate Pledge, a voluntary agreement among companies to achieve net-zero emissions by 2040.

But Amazon’s emissions have gone up each of the past several years, and the company recently acknowledged that rising emissions from data centers could get in the way of its climate goals.

“The path is changing in ways that no one quite anticipated even just a few years ago — driven largely by the increasing demand for generative AI,” [the company said](#) in 2024, noting that it would “need to be nimble and continue evolving our approach.”

Margaret Callahan, an Amazon spokeswoman, said in a statement that “the world looks different now than when we co-founded The Climate Pledge, but our commitment hasn’t changed.” She added that Amazon was “transparent about the challenges, investing in innovation, and delivering measurable results.”

Microsoft also declared a climate moonshot in 2020: The company announced its [intention to become carbon negative](#), meaning it would be removing more carbon than it emits each year, by 2030 and to remove all of its historical carbon emissions by 2050.

But emissions have risen sharply since then, and last year, it acknowledged that those goals were becoming harder to achieve.

“In 2020, Microsoft leaders referred to our sustainability goals as a ‘moonshot,’” the company’s [chief sustainability officer, Melanie Nakagawa, wrote](#). “Nearly five years later, we have had to acknowledge that the moon has gotten further away.”

Google and Microsoft declined to comment.

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