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...Becker, however, warned that any use of offsets poses a "moral hazard."

"Economists like to say that if you get away with doing something because you don't suffer a penalty, then it encourages you to do more of the bad thing," he said. "So we don't want Ford to figure they can continue to make polluting trucks and plant trees in Guatemala because people won't judge them harshly for their risky behavior."

AUTOS

Big trucks offset praise for Ford's carbon neutrality goal



A Ford Mustang sits parked at an auto dealership in Montebello, Calif. Ford Motor Co. announced yesterday it's seeking to become carbon-neutral by 2050. Image of Sport/Newscom

Ford Motor Co.'s announced commitment yesterday to reaching carbon neutrality by 2050 drew mixed reactions from environmentalists.

Some praised Ford for becoming the first U.S. automaker to align its emissions trajectory with the Paris Agreement on climate change, saying it marked a milestone for corporate sustainability.

But others raised serious concerns about the company's historic responsibility for climate pollution and future reliance on carbon offsets.

Ford unveiled the new target in a [sustainability report](#), which detailed its environmental strategy for the coming decades ([Greenwire](#), June 24).

The company said it plans to work with the Science Based Targets Initiative — a partnership that helps companies set emissions trajectories in line with the best available science — to reduce emissions across its operations.

Notably, the company specified that it would include Scope 3 emissions, which encompass the emissions from the vehicles it sells to consumers.

Carol Lee Rawn, senior director for transportation at Ceres, a nonprofit that works with businesses and investors to promote sustainability, called the commitment "very positive."

"It's noteworthy that they're the only U.S. company that's announced a goal like this," she said. "I also think it's important that they're going to ensure these goals are approved under the Science Based Targets Initiative."

Rawn added that Ford has also shown a commitment to sustainability through its legal and regulatory activities, including its decision to adopt California's tailpipe pollution standards, which are stricter than those of the federal government.

Fred Krupp, president of the Environmental Defense Fund, agreed with this assessment.

"Ford Motor Company has shown bold environmental leadership by working with California on Clean Car standards starting in 2019, and through its continued commitment to working with the state, to keep our nation moving forward in the urgent race to cut climate and air pollution," Krupp said in a statement.

"Ford's action also importantly recognizes that we must rapidly electrify the automotive sector to enable all Americans to breathe cleaner, healthier air."

Others were less upbeat, pointing to Ford's history of pumping large quantities of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Dave Cooke, a senior vehicles analyst with the Union of Concerned Scientists, noted that Ford's F-150 pickup truck has been the best-selling vehicle in the United States for more than 30 years.

"Obviously the F-150 is their bread and butter, and while it is definitely one of the most efficient pickup trucks out there, it is still a highly polluting vehicle," he said.

The 2020 model of the F-150 emits 402 grams of carbon dioxide per mile when running on regular gasoline, [according](#) to fueleconomy.gov, a federal website maintained by EPA and the Department of Energy.

Overall, the vehicles that Ford sold last year emitted 135 million metric tons of CO₂, the sustainability report says.

That's the equivalent of operating 34 coal-fired power plants for a year, according to EPA's greenhouse gas equivalencies [calculator](#).

'The magic of offsets'

Another worry is Ford's potential reliance on carbon offsets, which support projects that reduce emissions elsewhere in the world, such as projects that help prevent deforestation in the Amazon or hand out cleaner cooking stoves in developing countries.

"I have some concerns about offsets. What is Ford committing to itself, and how much is it instead relying on the magic of offsets to save it?" Cooke said.

In recent years, some experts have questioned the effectiveness of carbon offsets aimed at preventing deforestation. They note that wildfires and other hazards can undermine these efforts.

"I think a lot of offsets aren't worth the paper that they're written on," Lucy Gilliam of Transport & Environment, Europe's leading clean transportation campaign group, previously told E&E News ([Climatewire](#), Sept. 10, 2019).

"I mean, the Amazon is burning right now," Gilliam said. "There are probably some offsets in there that are up in flames. And that's the problem with offsets. You can't guarantee that the carbon that's taken out of the atmosphere is going to stay that way."

Dan Becker, clean transport director at the Center for Biological Diversity, agreed.

"Planting trees in Guatemala so F-150s can guzzle and pollute is not the way to prevent global warming," he said. "The trees don't always stay up due to chain saws and hurricanes. They don't necessarily absorb as much as the trucks emit."

In the sustainability report, Ford said it hoped to avoid using carbon offsets if possible, although it acknowledged they may be unavoidable in some instances.

"It is important to note that carbon neutrality can be achieved using emission reductions and carbon offsets. Our philosophy is to focus on emission reductions," the report says. "We are not planning to use carbon offsets for our light duty vehicles, although they may sometimes be necessary, especially for medium- and heavy-duty vehicles and in less developed regions of the world."

Becker, however, warned that any use of offsets poses a "moral hazard."

"Economists like to say that if you get away with doing something because you don't suffer a penalty, then it encourages you to do more of the bad thing," he said. "So we don't want Ford to figure they can continue to make polluting trucks and plant trees in Guatemala because people won't judge them harshly for their risky behavior."

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