CLEAN AIR TASK FORCE

Carbon Capture and Storage in Europe FAQs

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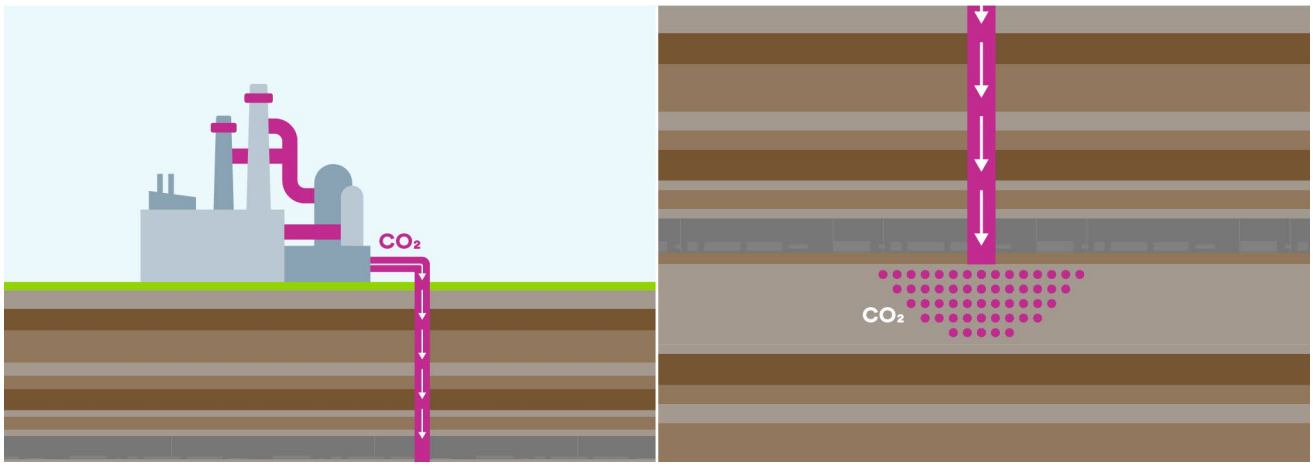
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What is carbon capture & storage and why does Europe need it?

What is carbon capture and storage?

CO_2 can be permanently prevented from entering the atmosphere and driving climate change by injecting it into certain types of rock formation found deep underground. The CO_2 must first be 'captured' by separating it from the CO_2-rich exhaust gases of industrial plants. The CO_2 capture process can use many different technologies, but currently the most frequently used solutions employ chemicals that selectively bind CO_2 and then release the gas when heated. CO_2 often needs to be transported to the storage location, which can be by pipeline, ship, rail, or road.

Figure 1: A simplified illustration of carbon capture (left) and storage (right)



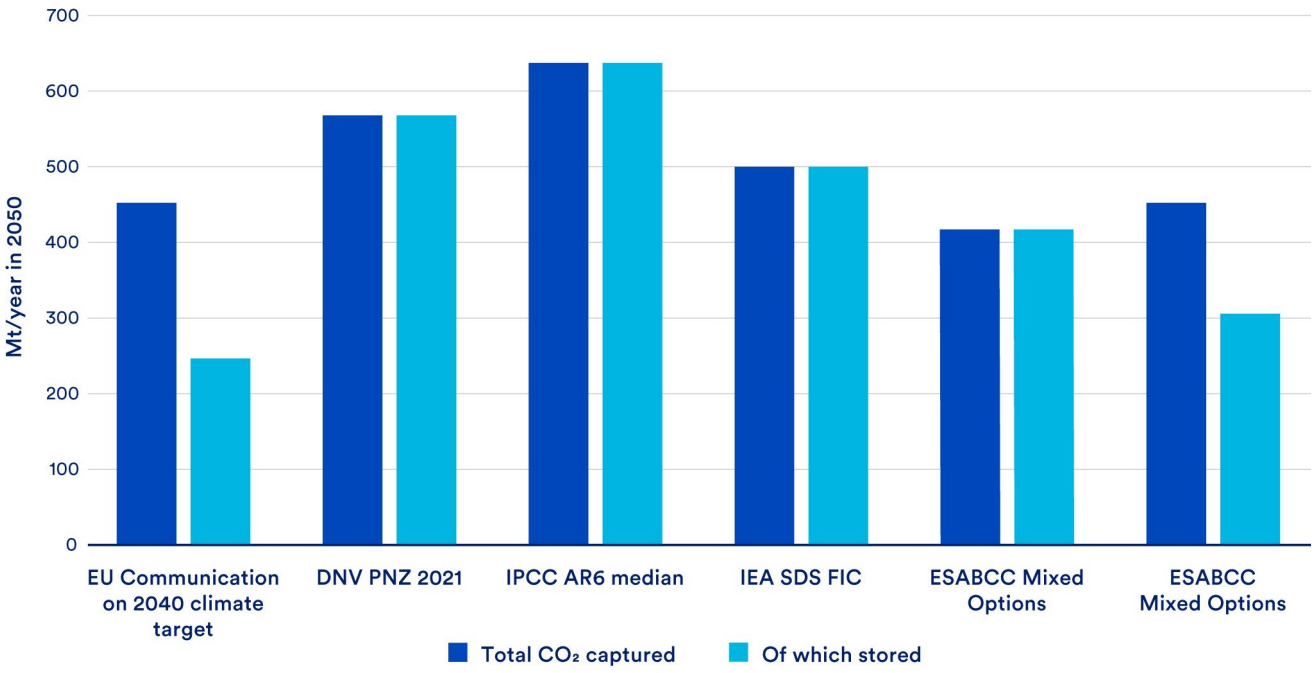
Why does Europe need carbon capture & storage to meet its climate goals?

Carbon capture is most needed to deal with CO_2 emissions from industrial sectors with few or no other options available, either because they inherently release CO_2 from a chemical process, or because they are very difficult to power with renewable electricity alone. This includes emissions from cement, chemicals such as fertilisers, waste incineration plants, and steel plants.

Permanent removal of CO_2 from the atmosphere will also be needed to balance any remaining emissions from sectors that are even more costly to decarbonise, such as aviation, and to reverse any 'overshoot' of acceptable atmospheric levels of CO_2.

The European Climate Law requires the EU to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 – a goal which is consistent with the International Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) recommendation to limit global warming to 1.5°C. Studies of how Europe can reach net zero in time nearly all show a significant role for carbon capture and storage technologies, both to cut CO_2 emissions from industry and remove CO_2 from the atmosphere. These include analysis by the IPCC, the International Energy Agency, and the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change (Figure 2). The EU's own analysis has determined that around 250 million tonnes a year of CO_2 should be captured and stored by 2050 for the climate neutrality goal to be achieved.

Figure 2: Estimates of the quantities of CO_2 which would be captured in Europe to reach net zero in 2050, according to various studies by the European Commission (EU only), DNV, the IPCC, the IEA and the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change (EU only)



While we can't know exactly how much carbon capture and storage will be required, it is clear that this technology will need to be scaled up very rapidly. Decarbonising Europe in less than 30 years is an unprecedented challenge that will require a wide range of technologies to tackle different parts of the economy and different countries. Having more technologies available also reduces the climate risk of other solutions failing to develop fast enough.

Is the technology proven at full scale?

The complete process of capturing and storing manmade CO_2 is demonstrated today at over 40 commercial sites around the world, with the earliest starting in 1972. Many of these plants are in North America, where CO_2 is widely used to increase oil production but becomes stored underground as a result. Five operating facilities store CO_2 in deep 'saline reservoirs' – purely for climate benefit – including the Sleipner and Snøhvit projects in Norway. Sleipner has been separating CO_2 from natural gas and safely storing it beneath the North Sea since 1996.

However, the individual technologies involved in carbon capture and storage are much more widespread:

- CO_2 separation technology has been used for nearly 100 years to remove CO_2 from natural gas.
- Some other industries, such as fertiliser and bioethanol production, produce relatively pure CO_2 or already carry out CO_2 separation as part of the process.
- Over 160 million tonnes of CO_2 are captured annually for use in industries such as food and drink or fertiliser production.
- There are over 8000 km of pipelines carrying CO_2 in the USA and 300 km of CO_2 pipeline in the Netherlands.

Existing carbon capture technologies now need to be used at large scales in a wider range of polluting facilities. The technologies used to capture CO_2 can differ according to the industry where they are applied, but typically use very similar processes to those used commercially today. Carbon capture has been successfully trialled at large scales for many new applications, and full-scale versions for some key sectors – including cement and waste incineration – are currently under construction in Europe.

CO_2 storage

How is CO_2 stored in geological formations?

CO_2 storage takes place at depths of more than 800 metres underground, where the high pressures ensure that CO_2 remains in a liquid-like state, trapped within the tiny pores found in rocks such as sandstone (Figure 3). These rock formations can be spent oil and gas reservoirs or contain very salty water – these are known as saline aquifers or saline reservoirs.

Suitable storage sites are carefully chosen to have a denser, impermeable layer of 'cap rock' lying above the porous rock, which prevents CO_2 from moving upwards towards the surface. Over time, the CO_2 becomes increasingly securely bound as it dissolves in water and can eventually – over hundreds of years – turn into solid minerals (Figure 4). The European Union (EU), Norway, and the UK have comprehensive legal frameworks to regulate CO_2 storage activity. These require new storage sites to be thoroughly assessed for suitability before a permit to store CO_2 is granted, as well as ensuring that operators constantly monitor the store for leakage and demonstrate the CO_2 is stable before closing the site.

Figure 3: CO_2 Storage

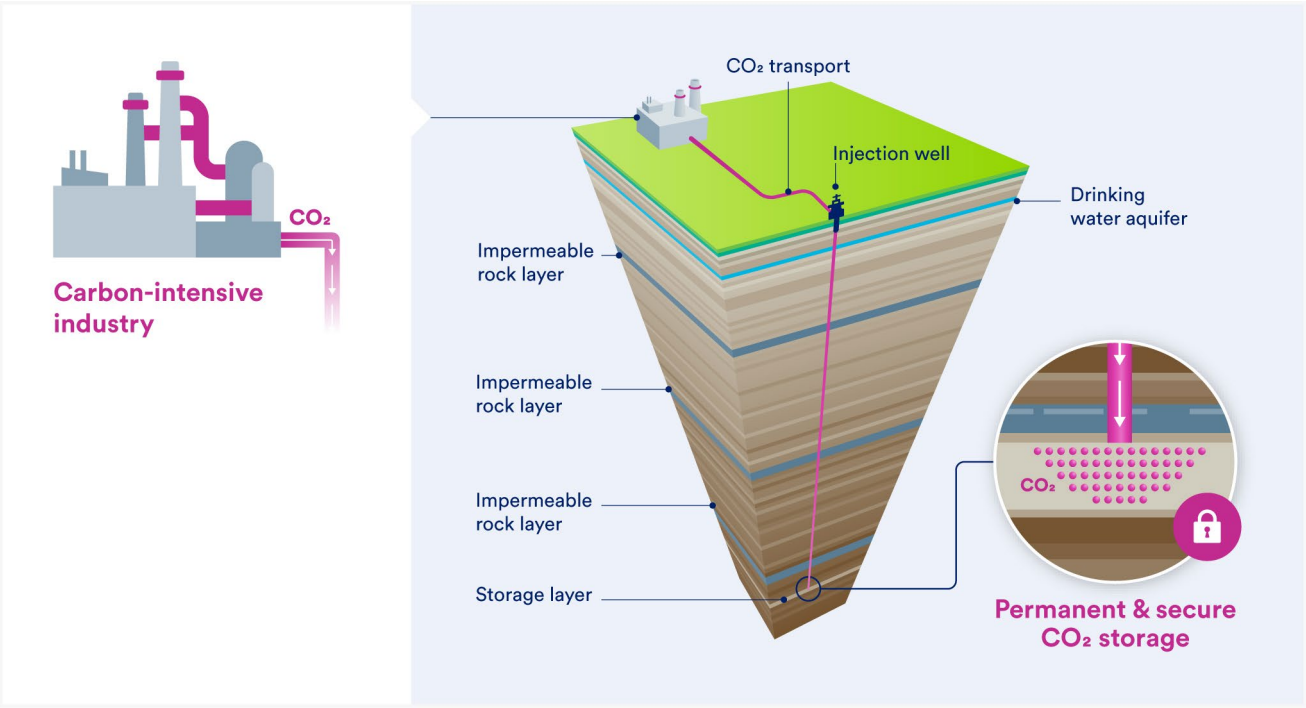
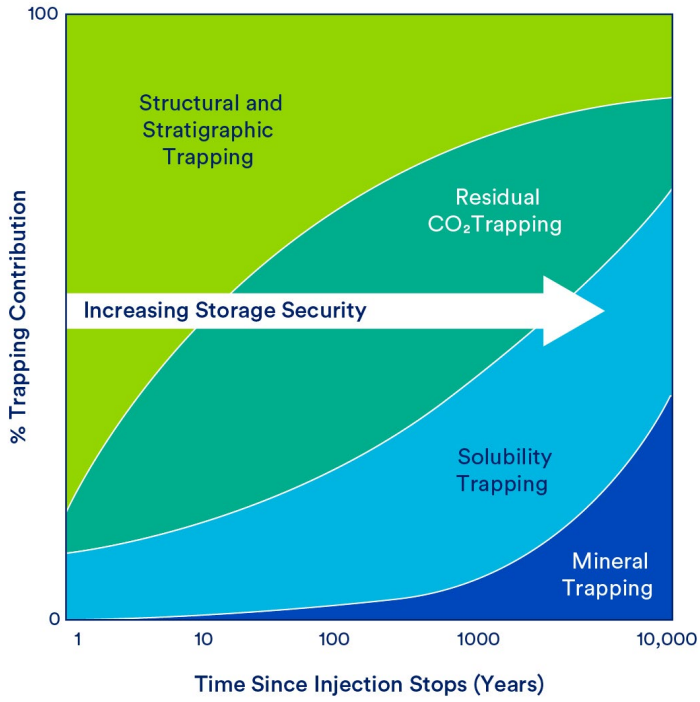


Figure 4: How CO_2 becomes bound ('trapped') by various mechanisms within the storage reservoir

CO_2 is initially prevented from moving upwards by impermeable caprock (structural trapping). It also becomes held within rock pores by capillary forces (residual trapping) and dissolves in brine over time (solubility trapping). Eventually, a portion of the dissolved CO_2 reacts with the rock to form solid mineral carbonates (mineral trapping). Aside from structural trapping, all these forms of trapped CO_2 would require deliberate human intervention to reverse.



How do we know CO_2 will be stored permanently?

CO_2 leakage from properly assessed and characterised storage sites is considered extremely unlikely. Similar geological structures have kept oil and gas, and even many natural stores of CO_2, trapped in place for millions of years. The International Panel on Climate Change has stated that CO_2 stored in geologic formations is likely to remain 'permanently isolated from the atmosphere' or 'for more than a 1000 years' if the storage site is appropriately selected. No manmade sites developed for the purpose of CO_2 storage have ever been known to leak.

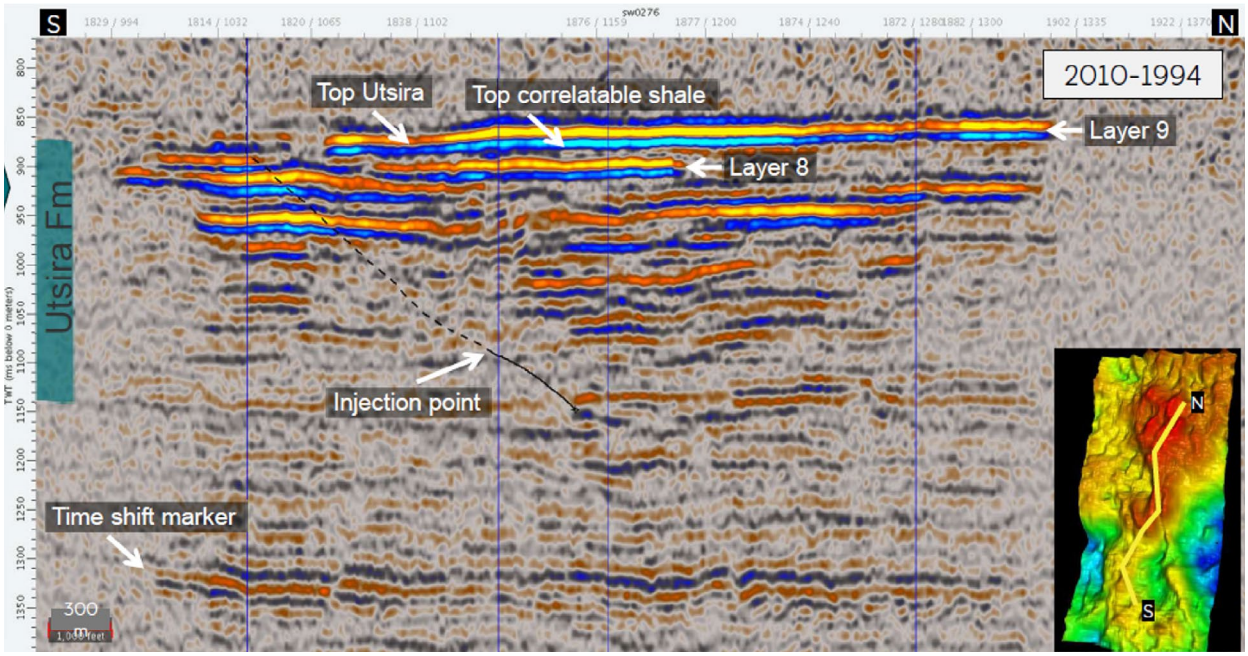
Under European legislation, storage sites must be thoroughly assessed for their potential to permanently store CO_2, including computer modelling of how the stored CO_2 will behave over centuries. Operational storage projects then use sensitive monitoring techniques that can track the underground spread of CO_2 (Figure 5). This takes place during injection and long after injection stops to verify that the CO_2 remains in place and has reached a stable state.

As shown in Figure 4, a growing proportion of CO_2 becomes bound within the rock, and would need human intervention to be released. Possible leakage pathways for the remaining 'free' CO_2 include abandoned manmade wells or, to a lesser extent, through natural geological faults. Regulations in Europe require any wells in the area to be identified and sealed before CO_2 is injected.

If leakage of stored CO_2 were to occur, it would likely be at rates that are so low the CO_2 storage would still have significant value as a climate solution. Acceptable leak rates are generally determined to be less than 0.01% per year from the store, which would retain 99% of the CO_2 over 100 years. A study of potential leak global leak rates, based partly on leakage from gas reservoirs and natural CO_2 stores, projected average annual leakage rates of up to 0.0002% in a well-regulated industry. Similarly, a study of CO_2 storage permanence for the UK government estimated that a worst-case scenario might amount to around 0.07% of the stored CO_2 leaking over a 100-year period.

Figure 5: Visualisation of CO_2 stored by the Sleipner project using seismic imaging, with bright areas showing the presence of CO_2 in rock layers

Soucre: Furre et al., 2015



Is there enough space to store the CO_2?

Initial assessments have indicated that Europe has the capacity to store up to 500 billion tonnes of CO_2, or around three hundred years' worth of CO_2 emissions from all the region's industry and power generation. CATF analysis highlights that large areas of the region have suitable geology for CO_2 storage, but seismic mapping and exploratory wells are needed to better characterise individual locations and more accurately determine the available capacity. Currently, detailed assessments of potential CO_2 storage sites are often limited to areas that have already been explored for oil and gas.

Is carbon capture and storage used to produce more oil?

Most of the CO_2 stored today is injected for the purpose of 'enhanced oil recovery' in North America, where CO_2 is pumped underground to increase oil production from older wells. This is because, until recently, there has been no other incentive for storing CO_2 underground. While CO_2 can be measurably and permanently stored during enhanced oil recovery, climate policies are helping to ensure that new CO_2 storage plans are largely focused on storage for its own sake – without fossil fuel production.

In Europe, there are no plans for CO_2 storage with enhanced oil recovery and it is explicitly excluded from contributing to the European Commission's proposed CO2 storage target. Several of the proposed CO_2 storage sites in Europe use old oil and gas reservoirs, as these often offer a lower-cost option for early developments. However, their use as storage sites requires a change in operating licence that is very unlikely to be reversed to continue production.

CO_2 capture

How does CO_2 capture work?

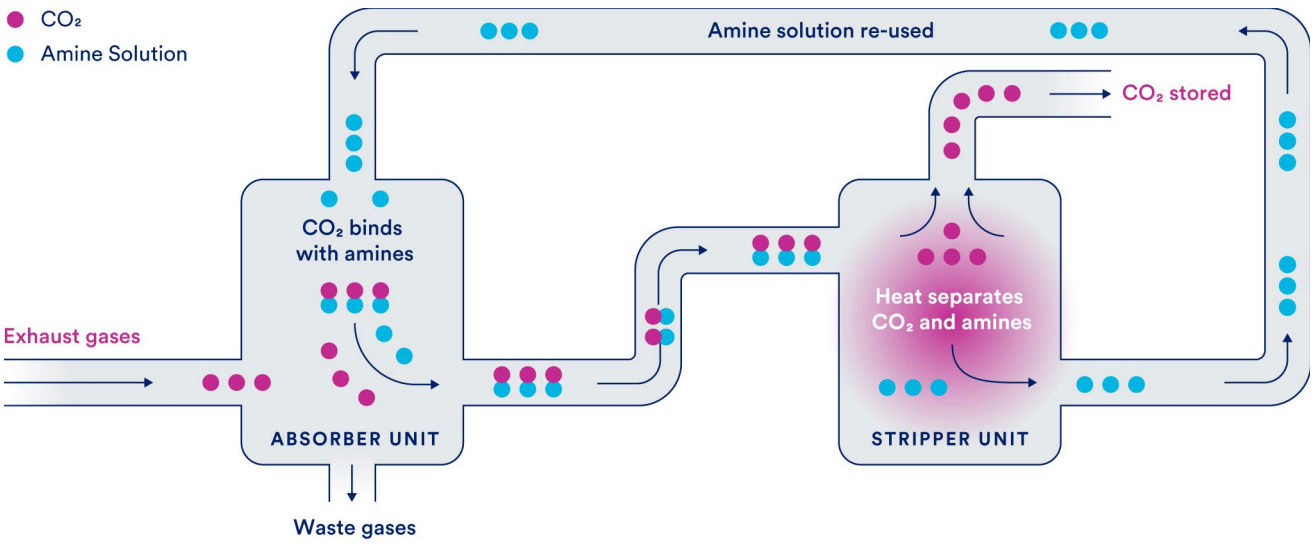
CO_2 needs to be in a relatively pure state before it can be safely transported and stored underground. Other gases and impurities can interfere with these processes or increase the energy required to compress the CO_2. However, different kinds of industries produce CO_2 at a wide range of concentrations, from as low as 4% (from burning natural gas) to 95% (ammonia production). This is why most polluting facilities need to use technologies that separate out the CO_2 from the other gases they produce. The leftover gases often consist largely of nitrogen from the air.

For dilute CO_2 (below 20%), the most commonly used technologies are solutions of organic chemicals called alkanolamines – or simply 'amines' – which readily bind to CO_2 but are able to release it when heated. Using amines for CO_2 separation was first patented in the 1920s and has been widely used since then to remove CO_2 from natural gas, as well as to provide CO_2 for commercial uses. The gas mixture passes upwards through tall towers packed with material, while the amine solution flows downwards and reacts with CO_2. Now rich in CO_2, the solution is sent to another reactor where it is heated to release the pure gas (Figure 6).

There are many alternative technologies for separating CO_2 used commercially today, particularly for gas mixtures with higher CO_2 concentrations or at higher pressures. These include thin membranes which only allow CO_2 to pass through, or solid materials which selectively bind CO_2. Cooling the gas mixture down to very low temperatures can also allow CO_2 to be removed as a liquid or solid.

We have the technologies available to capture high purity CO_2 from any industrial exhaust gases, but different technologies will be best suited to different applications, and improvements continue to be made. There is considerable research interest in developing new technologies or optimising existing ones to use less energy, cost less, or have other environmental benefits.

Figure 6: A CO_2 capture process using amine absorption



Is carbon capture energy intensive?

Like most pollutant control technologies, carbon capture consumes energy – first to separate CO_2 from other gases and then to compress it for transportation and storage. The amount of energy needed for the separation depends on what kind of industrial process is producing the CO_2 and which technology is used to carry out the separation.

Some industries, such as oil refineries or fertiliser plants, produce quite concentrated CO_2 streams which can be separated with relatively little energy penalty. Others, including cement or waste-to-energy plants, have more dilute streams which are more challenging. For these sources, today's most mature capture technologies generally consume at least 2 gigajoules of heat energy per tonne of CO_2 captured. If this energy were supplied by natural gas combustion, roughly another 120 kg of CO_2 would be produced for every tonne captured, and these emissions would also need to be captured.

However, the energy required for carbon capture does not have to come from additional fossil fuel consumption. Many industrial producers produce waste heat that could be used to drive some CO_2 capture processes, while some technologies can be driven by green electricity. The carbon capture process itself also produces waste heat that some projects plan to reuse, for instance, in residential heating – effectively offsetting some of the energy penalty.

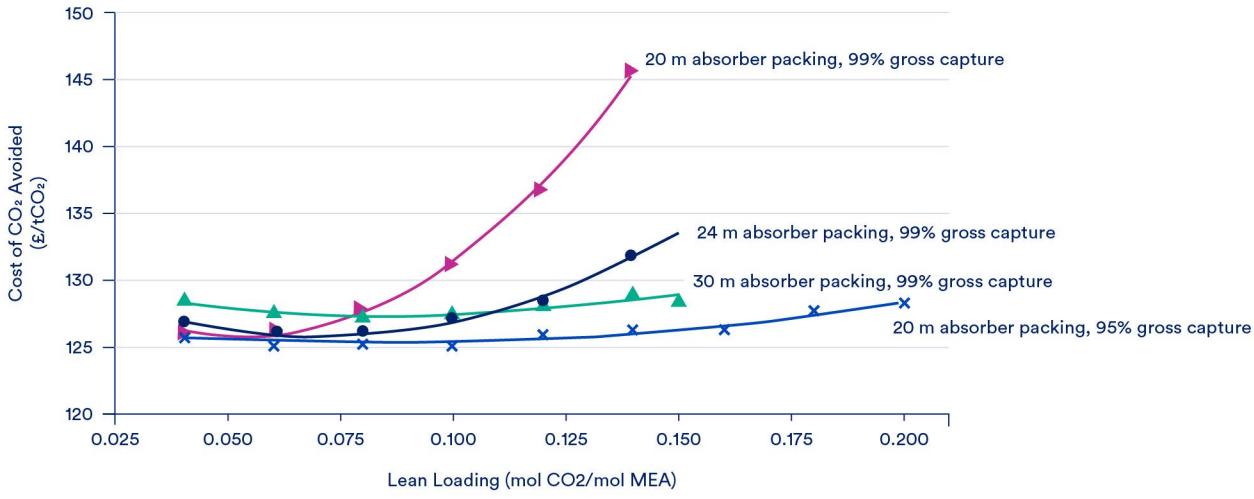
Can carbon capture prevent all the CO_2 emissions from an industrial facility?

Many operational and planned CO_2 capture projects are designed to capture around 90% of the emissions from an individual facility. Older projects that have not been designed with climate benefit in mind (but used for oil production) may capture even less. However, even with today's technologies there is no technical barrier to capturing up to 100% of the fossil CO_2 from many industries, and several new projects are now aiming for levels of at least 95%. Capturing more CO_2 carries a higher cost, but several studies have shown that the increase can be relatively small compared to the whole project cost (Figure 7).

The proportion of CO_2 captured by some operating projects can also look smaller where only one CO_2 source within a larger plant has been treated, or if only a portion of the CO_2 stream has been treated – usually in order to trial a new technology. This does not mean that it not possible to use the same technology to capture the rest of the emissions, only that the right incentives have not yet been in place.

Figure 7: Reaching 99% capture rates is possible with relatively little cost increase, provided a CO_2 absorber is appropriately designed and operated

Source: Mullen and Lucquiaud, 2025



How can carbon capture and storage be deployed in Europe?

Where is carbon capture and storage happening in Europe?

The storage of CO_2 beneath the Norwegian North Sea has been safely demonstrated since 1996. Since the Paris Agreement, the urgency of the net zero goal and growing awareness of the need for carbon capture and storage has led to growing political support for the technology in Europe and many other countries – particularly for industrial decarbonisation and permanent removal of CO_2 from the atmosphere. In 2025, the Northern Lights project in Norway began storing CO_2 captured from the Brevik cement plant, and has the capacity to receive CO_2 by ship from several other facilities, which are currently under construction in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Also under construction and scheduled to begin operating in 2026, the Porthos project will collect CO_2 captured from industries in the Rotterdam area for storage in a former gas field in the Dutch North Sea. In Italy, a relatively small amount of captured CO_2 (around 20,000 tonnes per year) has been injected into an offshore gas field near Ravenna since 2024, with the aim of expanding to a large-scale project by 2030. In total, CATF's project map identifies over 200 carbon capture or storage projects proposed in Europe today, across 23 different countries. Several countries are supporting CCS through national funding schemes, and the EU has selected many CCS projects to receive funding through its Innovation Fund.

Figure 8: The Northern Lights facility for receiving CO_2-carrying ships and injecting the CO_2 underground

Photo source: equinor.com



Is carbon capture and storage too expensive?

The cost of carbon capture and storage will depend heavily on the source of the CO_2, as more concentrated CO_2 costs less to capture. Current estimates suggest that lower-cost sources such as fertiliser plants and refineries could capture and store CO_2 for less than 90 euro per tonne, which is below the levels reached by the EU ETS price in 2022 and 2023. Other industries, such as cement and waste-to-energy, may cost at least 120 euro per tonne of CO_2 stored, while direct air capture is currently estimated to cost between 350 and 700 euro per tonne.

For comparison, the early years of offshore wind development in the UK saw projects receive up to £70 per MWh over the average market price of electricity, which is equivalent to around €130 per tonne of CO_2 avoided from fossil-fired generation. Funding this technology has successfully driven down costs and today, no subsidy is required. Just as for offshore wind and other low-carbon technologies, it is expected that the cost of carbon capture and storage will fall as technologies are optimised, lenders become more comfortable with financing projects, and new projects can connect to already established infrastructure for transporting and storing CO_2.

Even at today's costs, carbon capture and storage remains the lowest cost option for decarbonising many sources of CO_2, as well providing an indispensable service in permanently removing CO_2 from the atmosphere. This is why most detailed studies of possible ways to reach net zero show a significant role for carbon capture and storage in lowest cost solutions. A 2014 report from the IPCC indicated an average cost increase of 138% in pathways that excluded carbon capture and storage.

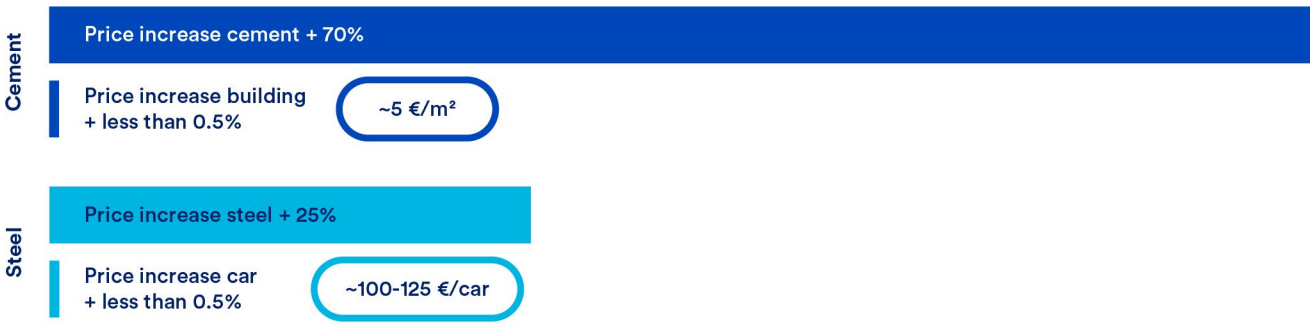
Reaching net zero will inevitably carry a cost for society, but one that will ultimately be less than the cost of dealing with the effects of global warming. Carbon capture and storage can help reduce that total cost.

Who will pay for carbon capture and storage?

Carbon-intensive industries will not capture and store their CO_2 emissions unless climate policy requires them to do so, while also ensuring they remain viable businesses. In Europe, the carbon price established by the Emissions Trading System is the principal tool for driving decarbonisation of large carbon emitters, but polluting industries are currently partly protected from paying this price so they can stay competitive with imported goods. In future, the carbon price may be high enough for industries to pay to capture and store CO_2, passing on the additional cost to customers in the price of low-carbon products. The cost of using carbon capture and storage to decarbonise raw materials, such as cement, steel, and plastics, can represent a relatively small increase in the cost of final products, such as buildings or cars (Figure 9). In future, governments and consumers may be able to absorb these costs as a premium for lowering their carbon footprint.

Figure 9: The relative price impact of decarbonised cement and steel in end-use products

Source: Rootzen and Johnsson, 2016; 2017



Most carbon capture and storage projects under development in Europe today face high costs as they bear the burden of new infrastructure development and use technologies that have yet to be mass-produced and optimised for cost. Governments can help bridge the financial gap faced by these early projects, particularly by funding 'public good' CO_2 transport infrastructure and storage sites that can be shared by many industries.

Policy can also help cover the shortfall in the carbon price by paying industries the difference between the cost of capturing and storing CO_2 and the cost of emitting. As the carbon price increases, governments pay less under this model. Using this approach, the Dutch government has guaranteed up to €2.1 billion for the large carbon capture and storage project planned in Rotterdam, but may not have to pay the projects at all if carbon prices remain above 2023 levels of over €80/t.

Government funding for the early development of carbon capture and storage can be likened to the support received by renewable energy, which has received annual subsidies in the EU surpassing €70 billion in the last five years. CATF analysis has shown that even the large funding allocations provided by the Norwegian and Dutch governments to launch carbon capture and storage projects represent less than average EU funding for wind and solar power over the past ten years, when compared on a basis of euros spent per tonne of CO_2 avoided.

What will be the impact on jobs and the economy?

Europe's heavy industries directly employ nearly four million people, and are associated with many more indirect jobs. The steelmaking industry alone is estimated to be linked to 1.5 million more indirect jobs in the EU. Given that Europe will continue to be reliant on the products of these industries for the coming decades, these jobs and their benefit to local and national economies should be kept within the region, rather than lost to other parts of the world. Transforming carbon-intensive sectors using carbon capture and other technologies can also generate thousands of new, high-skilled jobs, such as those associated with new infrastructure for the transport and storage of CO_2. Perhaps most importantly, by taking a leading role on carbon capture and storage, Europe can develop new technologies, industries and expertise which can be exported to help drive the global transition to net zero.

What are the risks associated with carbon capture and storage?

Is there a risk of earthquakes caused by CO_2 storage?

CO_2 storage in saline reservoirs and depleted oil and gas reservoirs requires the controlled injection of the CO_2 into permeable rock formations. It is conducted under carefully controlled conditions to ensure the pressure in the formation does not reach levels that would fracture the rock or cause movement in geological fault lines, as this could compromise the site's ability to contain CO_2. This is in contrast with many other commercial activities below ground, such as natural gas storage, extraction of oil and natural gas, or geothermal energy production, which carry a greater risk of inducing seismicity. In gas storage, the pressure is varied cyclically as gas is added or withdrawn, while gas production fields undergo a steady decline in the pressure. The injection of fluid into geothermal reservoirs has also been known to cause seismicity, but takes place under very different conditions to the injection of CO_2 into storage sites.

As a result, most recorded seismicity from CO_2 storage projects is of very low magnitude, below levels which can be felt by people. However, this will depend to a large extent on the geology of the site and the how the project is carried out. A review of seismicity induced by CO_2 storage projects notes only one project that has reported earthquakes of higher magnitudes, at the Cogdell enhanced oil recovery site in Texas.

Are there environmental risks associated with carbon capture and storage?

CO_2 is naturally present in the air and is produced by all living things. It is not harmful at low concentrations, but at sufficiently high concentrations it can displace oxygen in the air and asphyxiate people and animals. Increasing CO_2 concentrations can stimulate plant growth, but will eventually also cause plant death from lack of oxygen.

Although CO_2 storage sites are highly unlikely to release CO_2, various research projects have performed controlled releases of CO_2 to examine the possible effects were any CO_2 to be emitted from a storage site. Simulation of a gradual leak from the seabed by the GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research showed that CO_2 would rapidly dissolve in seawater, with a very localised impact on marine life due to acidification. Simulation of an underground CO_2 release on land by Montana State University has similarly been shown to have a very localised impact on plant life (around 2.5 metres from the leak), due to elevated CO_2 concentrations in the soil.

When assessing the environmental and health risks of carbon capture and storage, it is important to also consider the risks of not using carbon capture and storage. Climate change has already caused significant environmental damage, which will only worsen so long as CO_2 produced by humans continues to pollute the atmosphere. Carbon capture and storage can help slow and prevent this continued carbon pollution, reducing the environmental damage caused by climate change.

Are there risks to human health with carbon capture and storage?

CO_2 sinks in air, so can potentially accumulate in low-lying areas and become an asphyxiation risk. In volcanic regions such as parts of Italy, humans have lived for millennia alongside natural CO_2 vents, most of which produce CO_2 at rates far greater (up to 100 tonnes per day) than would be expected from failure of a manmade storage site. These have very occasionally caused fatalities, particularly when people have remained close to the ground in geographical dips. However, research by the University of Edinburgh have shown that the risk posed even by these vents is lower than the risk of lightning strike, or the chances of winning the lottery.

There is also a risk of exposure to CO_2 from accidental releases during transportation, for instance, from a pipeline, truck, or storage tank, if large volumes of CO_2 were allowed to accumulate in a confined area. CO_2 is already safely transported by rail, road and ship for commercial uses such as the food and beverage industry, and in the Netherlands, there is a large network of pipelines supplying industrial CO_2 to greenhouses, with no reported injuries or deaths. In the USA, CO_2 has been transported for 50 years for oil field operations, using a pipeline network which is now 8000 km in length, with one recorded injury and no deaths. Most leakage incidents have released less than 10 tonnes of CO_2. However, a rare large pipeline rupture caused by a landslide in Satartia, Mississippi in 2020 led to 45 people seeking medical attention.

Are there alternatives to carbon capture and storage?

Why can't we decarbonise using cheap wind and solar power?

Consistent policy support for wind and solar power has allowed them to become highly effective, low-cost options for decarbonising power generation in Europe and the rest of the world. However, low-carbon electricity can only help decarbonise the parts of our economy that can be electrified. Heavy industries such as the production of cement, steel, and chemicals rely on many processes that are challenging or impossible to replace with electricity. Cement and some chemicals release CO_2, not from fossil fuel combustion, but from the chemical reactions fundamental to their production. Other processes require high temperatures that are very difficult to produce using electricity alone.

Even if we are able to use renewable electricity to address an ever-increasing proportion of our emissions, the challenge is so great that we need to use all the tools we have available today. In Europe, only around 38% of electricity generation is renewable – carbon capture and storage can help reduce the demand for low-carbon electricity and prioritise it for uses where it is most needed, such as heating homes and powering electric transport.

Will we still need heavy industry in a low-carbon world?

Minimising our reliance on manufactured goods through lower consumption levels and increased recycling can play a vital role in reducing emissions from heavy industry. Historically, economies have become increasingly material-intensive as they have developed, although some developed countries are showing signs of breaking this dependency. Demand for cement, steel, and chemicals in Europe is nevertheless projected to remain fairly constant to 2050, even as recycling rates are increased. The rapid growth of the renewable industry is just one example of how these fundamental materials will continue to be needed in future. The EU's growth in wind and solar power could require over 8 million tonnes of annual steel production by 2050.

Using CO_2 storage for carbon dioxide removal

How can carbon capture and storage technologies be used for carbon dioxide removal?

As well as helping to reduce our CO_2 emissions, carbon capture and storage technologies can be used to permanently remove the greenhouse gas from the atmosphere – a process which is also known as 'carbon dioxide removal' or CDR. Direct air capture and storage (DACS) uses CO_2-binding chemicals or materials to separate the greenhouse gas from the air, before permanently storing the captured CO_2 in deep rock formations. CO_2 removal can also be achieved by capturing and storing the CO_2 released when biomass is burned for power or converted into other fuels. For these technologies to truly remove CO_2 from the atmosphere, it is vital to account for all the uncaptured emissions associated with the processes and ensure that any biomass used benefits both the climate and ecosystems. Although they play distinct roles in reaching our climate goals, the permanent storage of atmospheric and fossil CO_2 share many of the same challenges, particularly regarding the development of CO_2 transport and storage infrastructure.

Why should we remove CO2 from the atmosphere as well as reduce our emissions?

Reductions in greenhouse gas emissions should always be prioritised over removal of CO_2 from the atmosphere, as permanent removal is usually more costly and – if done too late – risks effects on the climate that could be difficult to reverse. However, emissions from some sectors, such as aviation and shipping, may be impossible to eliminate by 2050 or will cost less to remove from the atmosphere. Some removal will therefore be necessary to balance these 'residual emissions' at net zero. In addition, the European Climate Law includes a commitment for the EU to go 'net negative' after 2050, meaning more CO_2 will need to be removed from the atmosphere than is emitted. In recognition of these ambitions, the EU and many national governments are making growing efforts to expand a range of CO_2 removal technologies, including direct air capture and bioenergy with carbon capture and storage. The need for these kinds of CO_2 removal technologies are also clearly highlighted by the latest assessment by the International Panel on Climate Change, in which carbon removal using geological storage makes a significant contribution in over 90% of scenarios that limit warming to 1.5°C.



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