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## Lofty Pledge to Cut Emissions Comes With Caveat in Norway

By [ELISABETH ROSENTHAL](#)

OSLO — Last year, as [United Nations](#) scientists were warning of the perils of man-made [climate change](#), this small country of fjords and factories reacted with an extraordinary pledge: by 2050 [Norway](#) would be “carbon neutral,” generating no net greenhouse gases into the air.

Norway’s bold promise raised the bar for other nations, which were mostly still struggling to figure out how to reduce emissions, by even a fraction. Then, in January, the Norwegian government went a step further: Norway would be carbon neutral by 2030, it said.

But as the details of the plan have emerged, environmental groups and politicians — who applaud Norway’s impulse — say the feat relies too heavily on sleight-of-hand accounting and huge donations to environmental projects abroad, rather than meaningful emissions reductions.

That criticism has not only set off anguished soul-searching here, but may also come as a cold slap to the many countries, companies, cities and universities that have lined up to replicate Norway’s example of becoming carbon neutral — with an environmental balance sheet showing that they absorb as much carbon dioxide as they emit.

Many signed on not only to set an example of their own but also for a kind of public relations boon, or to preempt or get out ahead of government regulations they feel are probably inevitable. In the past year, the [Vatican](#) announced that it was carbon neutral, and companies like Wal-Mart say they are aiming for that goal.

But their claims — like Norway’s — all require asterisks, like home-run records buoyed by steroids. And as the Norwegian plan shows, achieving a carbon-neutral state, for now, often depends as much on how you make the calculation and how much money you spend, as it does on hard work, sacrifice or even innovation.

“We’re a nice little selfish country of petroholics, and that has made us lazy,” said Frederic Hauge, president of Bellona, Norway’s largest nongovernmental environmental organization. “The move from 2050 to 2030 is a sign of good intentions, but unless I see action, I’ve heard it all before.”

Despite its pledges, seen from the perspective of its smoke-spewing rigs producing billions of barrels of oil a year — Norway is the third largest exporter in the world — industrial Norway does not look like a poster child for environmental friendliness.

In the short term, the country is poised to become carbon neutral by financing environmental projects abroad, as allowed under the United Nations environmental accounting policy. That means that emissions at home can be “canceled out” by things like planting trees or cleaning up a polluting factory in a country far

away.

But Norway's actual plan for reducing its own emissions is much less clear. Like all the environmentally conscious Scandinavian countries, Norway made the easy changes decades ago. Any further cuts in emissions — the essential thing scientists agree is needed to stem the momentum of global warming — are likely to be painful.

If anything, its early experience shows that cutting carbon dioxide emissions will require real sacrifice closer to home, like driving less, flying less and putting restrictions on businesses. Instead, so far it is relying in large part on developing unproved technology.

The Norwegian model, critics say, may not be a path to the future of carbon neutrality and may not be sustainable, because it requires deep coffers and, anyway, there are not enough environmental projects in poor countries to cancel out all the emissions of the developed world.

“They're willing to spend a lot of money on a climate policy that's based abroad, but so far they haven't been quite so willing to make politically difficult choices at home that people will feel,” said Steffen Kallbekken, a senior analyst at Cicero, the Center for International Climate and Environmental Research, a nongovernmental group here. “So it's not so much of a model as it could be.”

The same goes for the Vatican, which “offsets” its emissions by planting forests in Hungary, but it did not enter into the calculation the polluting travel of its priests and officials — nor the emissions caused at properties outside Vatican City.

Wal-Mart, an acknowledged leader on the environmental front, is encouraging suppliers to emit less carbon, but does not take into account the emissions caused by the millions of people who have to drive to its stores, which are in many cases located in places where public transportation is often unavailable.

Those kinds of accounting gaps and trade-offs are widespread and mask the true challenges ahead, even for well-intentioned countries like Norway, scientists and environmental groups say.

Behind Norway's green pledge lies an uncomfortable truth: though this country of five million is fairly eco-friendly — with, for example, high taxes of cars and fuel — as one of the world's top sources of oil and natural gas, it exports emissions all over the world. It also maintains a broad industrial base of its own.

In its recently released Climate Change Performance Index 2008, the nonprofit group Germanwatch, which is active on environmental issues, ranked Norway 16th out of 56 countries, tied with Indonesia, and well behind Sweden, Britain and Germany.

Heidi Sorensen, state secretary of Norway's Environment Ministry, acknowledged the contradiction. “We are living in a constant dilemma in Norway because we have grown rich on the petroleum sector, releasing CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere,” Ms. Sorensen said. “So there's a lot of discussion about what responsibility we have. If we're going to tell countries like China and India to lower emissions, we have to do something, too.”

That something has been to finance good-will projects globally. At the climate conference in Bali, Indonesia,

in December, Norway announced that it would spend 3 billion Norwegian kroner (about \$538 million at the time) to prevent deforestation, with a special focus on projects that would also try to alleviate poverty in Africa. “We hoped this would serve as a model for other countries,” Ms. Sorensen said.

Such projects fall outside international carbon accounting schemes. If those project were taken into account, “we could be carbon neutral now,” Ms. Sorensen said.

But critics of the approach say the country’s leaders are not doing enough at home. Mr. Hauge of Bellona said the government needed to be more specific and aggressive in following through on its plans.

Norway has also been investing in emerging technologies, particularly carbon capture and storage, in which emissions produced by factories are stored underground. Perfecting the technique would be “Norway’s moon landing,” the government announced, a piece of inspirational science to benefit the world.

Most everyone in Norway applauds those moves, but that is where the cheering ends. The government has not been specific about its plans to reduce emissions at home, and that is making many nervous.

“We are very positive about dialogue with the government and very positive about reducing greenhouse gases, but we want to be very careful that industry doesn’t end up a loser,” said Finn Bergesen, director general of the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise. “It’s a good thing to set goals, but goals have to be realistic.”

Recently, a Norwegian aluminum producer announced that it would open a new plant — in Dubai. “We have some of the cleanest plants in the world, and if they close up here and pop up in China — where they will not be so clean — that’s not to anyone’s benefit,” Mr. Bergesen said.

The one large political group that opposes the carbon-neutral goal, the Progress Party, has become increasingly vocal.

“They have a goal but they don’t have a plan, and for me spending money without focus on things that are merely symbolic is a problem,” said Siv Jensen, the party’s leader, who is sometimes mentioned as a candidate to become Norway’s next prime minister.

Ms. Jensen would like more money spent on things like roads, improving Norway’s recycling program and exporting knowledge of hydropower. Any further steps will not be easy.

Cars and fuel in Norway are already heavily taxed, and gas-guzzling cars have long been taxed more than small, economical models. A sport utility vehicle in Norway costs four times as much as one in the United States.

Other countries can close highly polluting coal-fire electricity plants as an easy first step toward reducing emissions. But Norway barely uses any coal at all. More than 95 percent of the country’s electricity is from waterfalls — eco-friendly, renewable hydropower.

The main polluter in Norway is heavy industry — oil, gas, metal refining. They are, of course, the industries that have made Norway rich. Their revenues ensure high pay and good benefits here, and they help pay for

reducing deforestation in Africa.

Environmental advocates say Norway should take the next step, issuing fewer permits for oil exploration, for example, and even raising gas taxes. Instead of exporting energy, Mr. Hauge suggests, Norway should use some of it domestically to create things like low-priced solar panels for use in the developing world.

“We will sacrifice — in our own rich country way,” he said. “We can’t go to ski so easily anymore. Maybe you’ll have to stop your electric car after 350 kilometers,” about 217 miles. “But will we freeze? No. We’ll be able to solve it.”

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