

Amazon signs big allies in pledge to be carbon neutral

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Amazon has attracted new allies for The Climate Pledge that founder and CEO Jeff Bezos announced last September.

Indian information technology consulting giant Infosys, U.S. wireless market share leader Verizon and U.K. consumer goods manufacturer Reckitt Benckiser Group (RB) signed the pledge, which calls on companies to eliminate or offset all greenhouse gas emissions by 2040.

The three large companies, based on three continents and in three very different industries, illustrate the range of challenges and corporate approaches to the [climate emergency](#), which continues amid widespread protests against systemic racism and a global pandemic—both adding urgency and complexity to the [climate](#) response.

Through these unprecedented challenges, Amazon has "stayed the course" on the pledge, according to Kara Hurst, Amazon vice president and head of worldwide sustainability. Each Amazon business unit is developing internal goals to decarbonize, she said via email. Business leaders are given emissions information "so they can incorporate that into their decision-making."

The addition of new signatories to The Climate Pledge "will drive a new wave of investments and development of innovative low carbon products and services that will be required to meet their commitments," Hurst said in a corporate blog post.

But even as more companies join—Amazon says several more announcements are in the offing—activists question the adequacy of The Climate Pledge target, touted by Bezos as a decade earlier than the Paris Agreement's [emission reductions](#) that scientists say preserve a chance of limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels.

"Amazon's Climate Pledge raises more questions than it answers about how major companies will successfully decarbonize their operations. Science has shown the next ten years matter the most to slow the climate emergency—2040 may be too late," Elizabeth Jardim, senior corporate campaigner with Greenpeace U.S., said in a statement after Amazon announced the new signatories to The Climate Pledge.

Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, whose pressure campaign in late 2018 and 2019 preceded Bezos' Climate Pledge announcement, want the [company](#) to reach zero emissions by 2030.

Each of the three companies comes to The Climate Pledge with some goals already in place—including some surpassing the pledge targets—and challenges and opportunities specific to their businesses.

Infosys, for example, began reporting its greenhouse gas emissions, largely from diesel generators at corporate campuses, electricity use and business travel, in 2008—a step Amazon took for the first time last year, disclosing 2018 emissions of 44.4 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e)

Infosys pledged in 2011 to be carbon neutral in 2018, and set an internal price on carbon emissions in 2017. It pushed the carbon neutral goal back to 2020 and has again delayed it, until 2021, citing in its latest corporate sustainability report "the unprecedented COVID-19 scenario and the resulting uncertainties."

Infosys reported fiscal year 2020 direct and indirect emissions (such as fuel combustion for operations and emissions from purchased electricity) of 139,407 tons of CO₂e. The company reported an additional 151,502 tons of CO₂e from emissions generated by activities up and down the supply chain but outside of a company's direct control.

In addition to focusing on its own operations, Infosys has invested heavily in emissions offsets—payments to third parties for practices expected to avoid emissions or remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, such as switching to more efficient cook stoves or planting trees. The company reports a portfolio of offset credits sufficient to cancel out 461,626 tons of CO₂e, from projects to bring biogas systems and stoves that don't use firewood to people in rural villages.

Verizon has, in the last 18 months, accelerated efforts to reduce its [greenhouse gas emissions](#), said James Gowen, the company's chief sustainability officer and vice president of supply chain operations.

"Earlier this year, our CEO reiterated our commitment to the Paris Agreement," Gowen said in an email. "So when Jeff and his team reached out about The Climate Pledge, we saw this as the perfect way to continue to expand the breadth and boldness of our program."

In 2018, Verizon's direct and indirect emissions were just over 4.4 million tons of CO₂e. It also accounted for 98,188 tons of CO₂e from business travel.

Some 91% of the company's direct and indirect emissions came from electricity used to power its networks, providing a relatively straightforward pathway to decarbonization through improving cooling systems and testing higher operating temperatures in network facilities, and purchases of wind and [solar energy](#). The company last year pledged to be carbon neutral by 2035.

Verizon in February announced plans to purchase more renewable energy, drawing on a \$1 billion bond issue devoted to emissions reductions, but it ranks last among the four largest U.S. wireless providers in clean energy usage, according to a report released Tuesday by Green America, a nonprofit pursuing social justice and environmental

health through consumer-driven economic changes, and based on corporate disclosures of 2018 energy use.

Bellevue-based T-Mobile ranked first with a commitment to reach 100% renewable energy next year.

RB, which makes a range of consumer products under brand names including Lysol, Clearasil and Woolite, announced it was accelerating its climate mitigation plans earlier this month.

The company reports emissions in 2019 totaled 36.4 million tons of CO₂e. More than three-quarters of its reported emissions are related to consumer use. In addition to moving to 100% renewable energy by 2030 and investing in efficiency improvements at its factories, the company is trying to drive changes in consumer behavior.

Critics of corporate climate pronouncements call out their reliance on emissions offsets to reach the goal.

There is broad agreement that it's important to incentivize these practices, including the natural climate solutions such as reforestation and wetlands preservation that one widely cited study estimates could account for more than a third of emissions reductions needed by 2030. But their use to balance out ongoing corporate emissions from things with no immediate zero-carbon alternative, such as air transportation and steel production, continues to draw skepticism.

Amazon declined to say how much of its 2040 greenhouse-gas footprint it anticipates "neutralizing" through the use of offset credits, nor would it specify requirements, if any, embedded in The Climate Pledge.

Each company that signs the pledge "will have its own needs and will map out its own journey to become net zero, and offsets should only be

the last piece of the puzzle for any remaining emissions," Hurst said, adding that offsets must be "additional, quantifiable, real, permanent, and socially beneficial."

"For Amazon's Climate Pledge to be a credible effort we need far more transparency than simply reporting emissions data," Greenpeace's Jardim said. "We need concrete plans for how companies will transition off fossil fuels in the next decade, as well as commitments to prioritize deep decarbonization pathways over carbon offsetting."

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