# Corporate green pledges clash with lobbying efforts undermining EU climate goals



In the evolving landscape of corporate responsibility, a pressing question looms: Can companies truly be considered “responsible” when their public statements champion sustainability while their lobbying efforts appear to undermine it? This dilemma has come to the forefront as corporate lobbyists in Brussels engage actively in shaping the EU's green policies, highlighting a disconnect between corporate commitments and the positions of their industry associations.

Research from InfluenceMap, an independent think-tank, reveals a troubling trend in this regard. While individual European companies have made strides in supporting pro-climate policies—rising from 3% to 23% of those fully aligned with science-based climate advocacy since 2019—the corresponding lobby groups have lagged significantly. Only 12% of these associations align with the same standards, a disparity underlined by suggestions that less ambitious members stifle progressive advocacy within these groups.

This widening gap raises complex questions about the integrity of corporate lobbying. The lowest graded industry bodies, such as the European Automobile Manufacturers’ Association and the European Cement Association, garnered dismal D+ scores, whereas many member companies scored between B- and C-. This trend suggests that while individual businesses may seek to project a green image, they may simultaneously endorse—or at least passively allow—their associations to resist stringent climate policies that could threaten their interests.

As the EU's political climate shifts, particularly towards more conservative agendas, this misalignment could threaten essential climate initiatives. Industry experts stress the importance of ensuring that trade associations actively promote climate-friendly policies, rather than passively resisting the regulations that can bolster European competitiveness and address impending climate crises.

Unilever has emerged as a notable example of a firm tackling this issue head-on. The company, whose Chief Sustainability Officer Rebecca Marmot has publicly urged trade associations to enhance their climate policies, identified several associations, including the German Chemical Industry Association and the European Chemical Industry Council, as having historically opposed critical reforms. Unilever's commitment to transparency is encapsulated in its annual Climate Policy Engagement Review, which revealed 18 out of 26 associations examined had no instances of misalignment with Unilever’s climate policies—a notable improvement from the previous year.

Yet, even with these gains, nearly half of the surveyed associations remain only “passively aligned” with climate objectives, reflecting a concerning ambivalence towards more aggressive climate action. Unilever has made it clear that it is not averse to reconsidering its memberships with associations that fail to evolve; its preference is to engage and drive improvements collaboratively.

This proactive approach among leading companies highlights the potential for trade associations to serve as powerful allies on climate action, provided they align with scientifically credible policies that adhere to the Paris Agreement. Pressure from stakeholders and investors may catalyse greater transparency and accountability in lobbying practices, compelling companies to scrutinise their associations more rigorously.

The disparity between public commitments to sustainability and the underlying lobbying actions of industry groups illustrates a critical tension in corporate environmental accountability. Moving forward, the challenge lies in harmonising these two narratives to ensure corporate actions reflect genuine dedication to climate initiatives rather than a facade designed to appease public and regulatory scrutiny.

Given this intricate web of corporate interests and environmental responsibilities, greater diligence is essential. Businesses and their associations must recognise that the stakes are high: achieving meaningful climate action requires not only setting ambitious targets but also the unwavering alignment of advocacy efforts.

### Reference Map

* InfluenceMap report on corporate lobbying and sustainability (1, 2)
* Concerns regarding trade associations' support for green policies (3)
* Unilever's initiatives and insights on trade association alignment (4, 5, 7)
* General corporate trend of retreating from green targets (6)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ft.com/content/6b49b8a0-12a8-4a80-ad63-51890e42ae03> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/6b49b8a0-12a8-4a80-ad63-51890e42ae03> - A recent study by the think-tank InfluenceMap highlights a significant discrepancy between European companies’ public support for climate policies and the lobbying positions of their industry associations. While corporate climate advocacy has notably improved since 2019—with 23% of companies fully aligned with science-based policy, up from 3%—industry associations remain largely behind, with only 12% fully aligned. This divergence reflects either the disproportionate influence of less ambitious members within associations or a strategic move by companies to avoid public backlash while opposing green regulations via these groups. Major trade bodies in the automotive and cement sectors scored particularly low, receiving D+ grades compared to the B- to C- scores of individual companies they represent. The Corporate Leaders Group was a rare high scorer (A-), including members like Amazon, Google, and EDF. The study also underscores a lack of transparency in lobbying, which hinders investors' ability to assess companies' true alignment with sustainable practices. Companies like Unilever have begun addressing misalignments with their trade groups, signaling growing awareness of reputational risks. The findings urge greater scrutiny and transparency in corporate lobbying to ensure consistency between public commitments and behind-the-scenes influence.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/esg-watch-eu-shifts-right-trade-associations-need-back-green-agenda-2024-06-12/> - As the European Union shifts to the right, there is growing concern that trade associations may not be fully supporting the green agenda. Industry experts emphasize the necessity for these associations to promote stronger climate policies and prevent backsliding on essential climate-focused legislation that supports European competitiveness and prevents climate disasters. However, many associations remain passive or resistant to climate policies. There is a significant lack of transparency and misalignment between corporate climate goals and the lobbying actions of their associations. To foster change, companies like Unilever are leading by example in disclosing their trade associations' climate policy stances and pushing for alignment. InfluenceMap and other organizations provide frameworks and guidelines to help companies ensure their associations support credible policies for achieving net-zero emissions.
4. <https://www.csofutures.com/news/unilever-cso-urges-trade-associations-to-do-better-on-climate/> - Unilever's Chief Sustainability Officer, Rebecca Marmot, has urged trade associations to improve their climate policy positions. The company has identified several associations, including the German Chemical Industry Association (VCI) and the European Chemical Industry Council (CEFIC), that have opposed reforms to the EU Emissions Trading System and advocated for more lenient carbon border adjustment mechanisms. Unilever spends over €100,000 annually on its CEFIC membership and more than €20,000 with VCI. While the company is not opposed to withdrawing from associations that refuse to adjust their positions, it prefers to engage and push for continuous improvement to ensure associations work constructively with members and governments on climate issues. Marmot emphasized that associations can be powerful agents of change but some are passive or even hindrances, and they should do better.
5. <https://www.unilever.com/news/news-search/2025/unilever-encourages-trade-associations-to-support-stronger-climate-change-policies/> - Unilever's latest Climate Policy Engagement Review (CPER) shows a decrease in trade associations not aligned with its climate policies. In 2024, 18 out of 26 of the bodies surveyed had no examples of misalignment with Unilever's policies, up from 13 out of 27 the previous year. However, almost 50% are still only 'passively aligned' on climate issues, and Unilever is urging them to do more. The company is focusing its efforts where they are needed most to move towards its near-term climate targets and net-zero ambition. Trade associations can encourage government action on climate, helping to accelerate greenhouse gas reductions across the highest-emitting sectors in Unilever's supply chain, including energy, chemicals, and agriculture. Unilever believes that most of the industry bodies it works with could be doing more and is calling for better reporting of existing climate policy engagement and, in some cases, for changes to current association positions to make them scientifically aligned with Paris Agreement targets.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/c9fee776-1471-442c-aae8-8d78fe60faeb> - Many companies are retreating from their green targets, a troubling trend in the face of escalating climate crises, according to John Browne, former BP CEO and chair of the $3.5bn General Atlantic BeyondNetZero fund. Companies like Unilever, Bank of America, and Shell have backtracked on their commitments, often citing external factors such as inadequate regulation, governmental support, and technological delays. Governments are also falling short, with Scotland and Germany abandoning key targets. Despite consensus on the need for substantial emission cuts to limit global warming, many initial corporate targets were insufficient and challenging to achieve. The fallout includes a decline in sustainability-linked bonds and continued reliance on questionable carbon credits. Nonetheless, a segment of companies persists with net-zero initiatives, driven by investor demand for tangible climate action. The challenge remains in balancing ambition with realistic, measurable progress amidst an unstable regulatory environment.
7. <https://www.unilever.com/news/news-search/2024/unilever-calls-on-industry-associations-to-step-up-climate-efforts/> - Unilever is calling on industry associations to take a more active role in supporting climate policies. The company's review of 27 industry associations revealed that eight have no public record of meaningful climate policy engagement with governments, four have low engagement, and eight are misaligned with Unilever in one or more of its priority policy areas. Unilever is urging these associations to better report existing climate policy engagement and, in some cases, to change current positions to make them scientifically aligned with Paris Agreement targets. The company emphasizes that associations can be powerful agents of change but some are passive or hindrances, and they should do better.