

# The Carbon Coup revisited

The little-known 'forum' locking Europe into a fossil fuelled future



As the climate crisis worsens, fossil fuel emissions continue to rise, and the all the evidence screams that drastic action is needed now, the sight of the fossil fuel industry waving its golden ticket to continue extracting oil and gas forever should raise alarm bells. Instead, this climate-wrecking industry is being invited to stage a coup over democratic decision-making and rational climate policy. Welcome to the ICM Forum meeting, to take place in Pau, France, in October 2024.

The EU has spent the past two years turbo-charging policies to support Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS), a risky, costly technology that has repeatedly failed to work. It is intended to capture CO<sub>2</sub> from polluting activities like burning fossil fuels and store it in products or pump it underground (in the hope it will stay there). The most recent CCUS push is the European Commission's February 2024 Industrial Carbon Management Strategy (ICMS), which proposes an array of measures designed to massively scale up CCUS, CO<sub>2</sub> transport infrastructure (with the aim of creating a 'single market' for CO<sub>2</sub>), and technological carbon removals that depend on CCUS. These are all major demands of the fossil fuel industry, which has been given an official role in shaping EU climate and energy policy through the 'ICM Forum'.

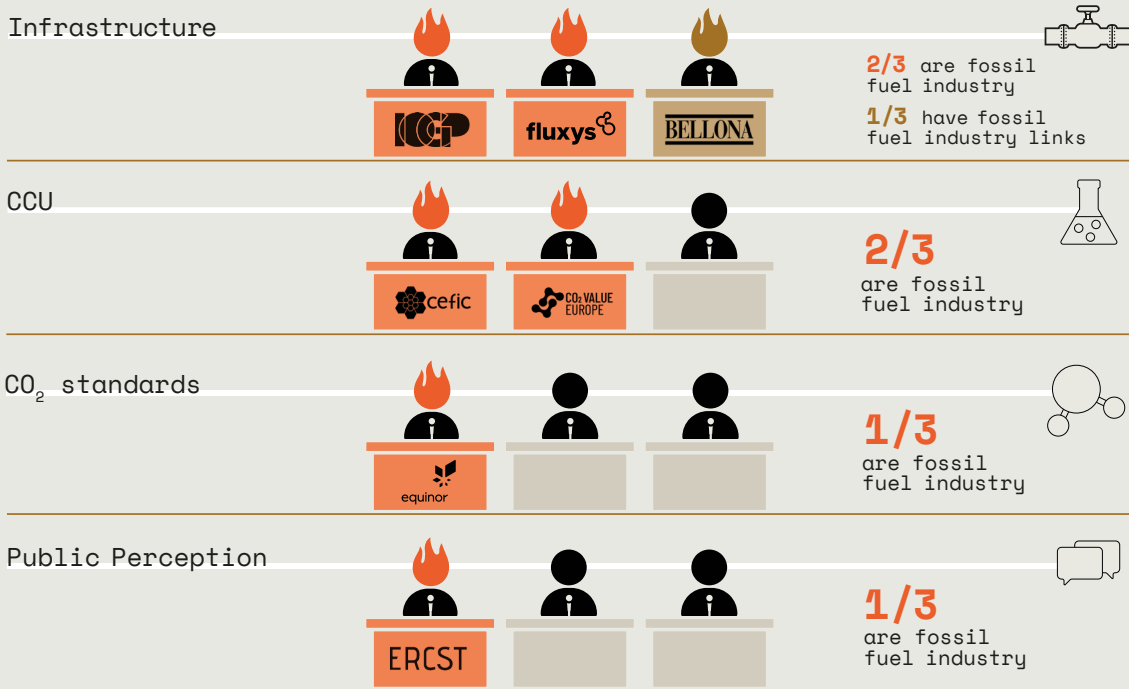
The ICM Forum was set up by the European Commission in 2021 as the 'CCUS Forum', an annual event at which working groups are set up, which in turn publish papers with recommendations for the Commission to follow. The ICMS proposal very closely resembles the recommendations of these working groups, which are dominated and steered by the fossil fuel industry, as revealed in Corporate Europe Observatory and ReCommon's Carbon Coup report.

Between 2021 and 2023, the annual Forum became bigger and its agenda more dominated by the oil and gas industry. Worse, every working group has been co-chaired by the fossil fuel industry or organisations with links to it. The fossil fuel industry has consistently been the largest sector represented in working groups that have so far published a paper. As the ICM Forum gears up to meet again in Pau, France, we can reveal that fossil fuel interests still co-chair all of its working groups – as appointed by the Commission in recent months.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Based on correspondence with DG Energy in summer 2024, the co-chairs of the working groups (WGs) renewed or set up at the 2023 forum, represent the following organisations: WG on infrastructure: Bellona (various links with fossil fuel industry – see the Carbon Coup), IOGP (oil and gas group whose members include ExxonMobil, Equinor, Chevron, Shell, etc), Fluxys (Belgian gas grid operator); WG on CO<sub>2</sub> standards: Cembureau, TNO, Equinor (Norwegian oil company); WG on public perception: EPG, Fraunhofer and ERCST (think tank whose members include TotalEnergies, Shell, ExxonMobil, Eni, BP, etc); WG on CCU: CEFIC (chemicals lobby group whose members include BP, TotalEnergies, Shell Chemicals, ExxonMobil Chemical Europe, etc), CEPI, CO<sub>2</sub> Value Europe (whose members include French gas grid operator Teréga, Mitsubishi Corporation – which has an oil and gas division – and Engie – which has fossil gas interests in LNG imports and new gas-fired power plants). The working groups were set up or renewed at the 2023 Forum but the co-chairs are decided by the European Commission much later in the year. At the time of writing, 3 October 2024 they have not yet published the papers, which will be discussed in Pau.

## ICM Forum Working Groups still steered by oil and gas

Fossil fuel industry still among newly appointed co-chairs of all four working groups



The [ICMS proposal](#) – which mentions the ‘CCUS Forum’ by name ten times – closely follows the template drawn up by one of the Forum’s first working groups: the [‘vision’ working group](#), co-chaired by the Florence School of Regulation and the Clean Air Task Force (CATF), which [both have fossil fuel ties](#). The ICMS mirrors the ‘vision’ paper’s plans to channel public funding into fossil fuel industry pockets and to give the industry more power over planning infrastructure, by:

- > including CCUS in the Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEIs), making CO<sub>2</sub> transport and storage infrastructure eligible for massive public money from Member States’ budgets;
- > promising to use the EU’s “participatory approach” (a euphemism for having the same industry that benefits from it designing it) towards gas network planning as a model for designing “EU-wide CO<sub>2</sub> transport infrastructure”. Even though [this approach](#) in the gas sector allowed companies with vested interests to [plan for overinflated](#) and unnecessary gas pipeline and storage needs, as well as to receive major public money to build them while locking us further into a fossil fuel economy;
- > indulging the paper’s vision of a ‘carbon removals market’, which would allow polluters to continue to emit CO<sub>2</sub>, providing they purchase removal credits from ‘offset’ projects, such as those that involve the [greenwashing fantasy](#) of [CCS-dependent carbon removal technologies](#), by among other things promising to consider its inclusion in the review of the EU’s Emissions Trading System (ETS).

If previous ICM Forum working groups were handed the job to design the Commission’s vision on CCS and the flagship Industrial Carbon Management strategy, current working groups have been given the mandate to develop key points of the implementation of the ICMS. This includes everything from a major role in the design and development of the CO<sub>2</sub> infrastructure network, to a say in when civil society should be involved in CCUS projects, to how to strike a balance between safety, risks, cost-effectiveness, and reliability.<sup>2</sup>

The Commission and member states’ increasing focus on a massive scale-up of CCS and related infrastructure therefore not only ignores the [growing evidence](#) of their technological and economic failure and enormity of its risks, but also the fact that existing solutions such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, and electrification as well as emerging solutions for hard to abate sectors are far more effective and cost-efficient.

<sup>2</sup> As explained by the Commission in correspondence with Corporate Europe Observatory over the summer of 2024. The four mandates can be seen with details ([infrastructure](#); [public perception](#); [CO<sub>2</sub> standards](#); [CCU](#)) disclosed to Corporate Europe Observatory under freedom of information regulations.

# CO2 infrastructure push brought to you by Big Oil

The ICM Forum is an egregious example of corporate capture that put on display every trick of the fossil fuel lobbyists to exert undue influence, including the revolving door between public and private sector. One recent example (with more featured in the [Carbon Coup](#) report) of this sort of conflict of interest is [Johanna Fiksdahl](#), a Policy Officer at DG Energy (seconded by the Norwegian Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, where she was for more than 10 years), who worked directly on the ICMS – including involvement in the ICM Forum’s infrastructure working group – only to [move to Equinor](#) as lead policy and regulatory affairs advisor.

Equinor has enormous interests in CCUS and associated CO2 infrastructure, and has been an active player in the ICM Forum, including as co-chair of the working group on CO2 standards, and as a member of the infrastructure working group (and a member or funder of many other groups that contributed to it).<sup>3</sup> The infrastructure working group was initially co-chaired by pro-CCS NGO Bellona and fossil fuel groups the International Association of Oil & Gas Producers (IOGP) and Zero Emissions Platform (ZEP), of which Equinor is a [member](#) and a [Vice-Chair](#) of, respectively. More recently, Belgian [gas grid operator Fluxys](#) (which [operates](#) 28,000 km of gas pipelines, plus liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals and underground gas storage) has taken over from ZEP.

The oil and gas lobby knows that if it can lock in the CO2 infrastructure – using public money to build a [vast network](#) of costly and [dangerous CO2 pipelines](#) – it can effectively lock in the future of fossil fuels. That’s why it is so significant that the ICMS follows many of the demands of the [infrastructure working group](#) and so dangerous that the implementation will also be heavily driven by them. These include ways to collectivise risks while privatising profits, such as minimising costs for polluters when building CO2 networks, funnelling EU and national public funds towards CO2 pipelines and storage sites, and planning provisions to protect companies from costs, risks, or liabilities if things go wrong (or if the promised CO2 market fails to emerge).



## In the spotlight: Equinor and its CCUS pipedream

Equinor, which [spends](#) up to €2.75 million each year lobbying Brussels, may talk about the green transition but in 2022 [86 per cent of its investments](#) went to fossil fuels. Norway’s state-owned oil company is a [major proponent of CCS](#), and its [Northern Lights](#) project (a [partnership with Shell and TotalEnergies](#)) has received over €1 billion of public money from the [Norwegian Government](#) and at least [€131 million](#) from the EU’s Connecting Europe Facility. Northern Lights plans to sequester large amounts of CO2 beneath the North Sea, despite problems with Equinor’s earlier CO2 storage efforts in Norway. These projects, at [Sleipner](#) and [Snøhvit](#), cast doubts on the feasibility and [long-term safety of offshore CCS](#), with pressure rises and unexpected CO2 movements posing the [risk of leakages](#) and causing project suspensions.

The fact that a key DG Energy official who was involved in both the ICM Forum and the ICMS strategy can jump ship straight to oil giant Equinor, without eyebrows being raised – and instead receive a [flood of congratulations](#) from the oil and gas industry, other big polluters and those in public office, thanking her for facilitating “valuable cooperation with industry actors” – shows how deeply rooted the problem of corporate capture by the fossil fuel industry has become. The Commission has refused to disclose the correspondence between Fiksdahl and Equinor (and also with the three new co-chairs of the ICM Forum working group on infrastructure – IOGP, Fluxys and Bellona – which she set while at office), despite the obvious risk of conflict of interests. And Fiksdahl is by no means the only notable revolving door case related to the ICM Forum.

Take Chris Davies, “Former MEP and the rapporteur of the CCS Directive”, as he was described in the agenda of the first two Forums, when acting as moderator of a panel. A long-time fossil fuel industry ally, Davies was [instrumental](#) in securing public funding for CCS in his role as [rapporteur of the 2009 Directive](#), strategising and [co-drafting amendments](#) with Shell, BP, and ZEP. What’s more, during the first two Forums, Davies was (and still is) also a senior advisor at Rud Pedersen Public Affairs, a Brussels-based lobby firm whose [clients](#) in that period included IOGP, BP, and Liquid Gas Europe. It was only after Davies [became](#) Director of [CCS Europe](#) in April 2023 – a pro-CCS lobby group whose [members](#) include gas grid operators Snam and Open Grid Europe – that the third Forum’s agenda made any reference to his fossil fuel connections. CCS Europe is now a [client](#) of Rud Pedersen, with a hefty annual lobby budget of between €200,000 and €299,000 to work on the ICMS and other relevant CCS files.

Davies also has remarkable access to decision-makers in the European Parliament, including EPP MEP Christian Ehler, rapporteur on the recent CCUS-enabling [Net Zero Industry Act \(NZIA\)](#) who also gave a keynote speech at last year ICM Forum in Denmark. During his tenure in this role, Ehler had [31 lobby meetings](#) on the NZIA, including 6 meetings with the fossil fuel industry, 19 meetings with other polluting industry players, but not a single meeting with NGOs. CCS Europe [boasted](#) that its director Chris Davies, “had the chance to privately comment upon the compromise amendments on #CCS put forward by Christian Ehler... amendments [which] fix gaps in the

<sup>3</sup> Contributing organisations to the Infrastructure Working group have included Equinor directly as well as groups, projects and entities that Equinor is part of or funds, such as [CCUS Norway](#), [Carbon Capture & Storage Association](#), [Coalition for Carbon Capture](#), [Eurogas](#), [Northern Lights](#), [University of Stavanger](#).

Commission's proposal" in a "positive development for CCS". Ehler also hosted a breakfast discussion organised by CCS Europe, "the best attended CCS event ever held in the European Parliament", including MEPs, Commission officials, and big polluters, promoting "ambitious targets" for CO2 storage, "streamlining" of permits for CO2 infrastructure, and more EU funding for CCS projects.

This only adds to the case made by the Carbon Coup report: that the ICM Forum is a close-knit club of the fossil fuel industry, other big polluters, and their allies. A key figure who worked closely with Fiksdahl is Krzysztof (Chris) Bolesta, formerly the Commission's CCUS lead and now Polish Secretary of State for Climate. Whilst at DG Energy, Bolesta was the main architect of the ICM Forum, and highlights "designing the policy framework for CCUS" and drafting the ICMS as a "fun" challenge that was "achieved collectively, working with the CCUS stakeholders." And Bolesta makes no bones about who those stakeholders were, name-dropping among others Chris Davies and Johanna Fiksdahl, former Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs and former DG Energy deputy Christopher Jones who both now work for the fossil fuel-funded Florence School of Regulation, as well as representatives from oil and gas lobby IOGP, fossil-funded think tank ERCST, and pro-CCS NGOs Bellona and CATF.

## ICM Forum 2024: A Total-greenwashing exercise

The ICM Forum began as online event in 2021, but in 2022 it was held in Norway, a powerful proponent of CCUS, and in 2023 in Denmark, which is pushing for CCUS-based carbon removals to be included in the EU ETS. The fourth Forum is being held on 10-11 October 2024 in Pau, France, home to TotalEnergies CCS pilot project Lacq. France recently unveiled its own CCUS Strategy, aiming to capture 4 to 8 million tonnes of CO2 per year by 2030, and 30 to 50 by 2050, as well as set up four CCUS industrial clusters, a CO2 transport framework, and export CO2 to storage sites in the North Sea and Mediterranean. The official programme for the French-hosted ICM Forum includes two site visits hosted by French fossil fuel companies: oil and gas major TotalEnergies and gas transport and storage company Teréga. Teréga is also co-hosting a cocktail and seated dinner with big polluter Lafarge-Holcim as part of the ICM Forum.

The visit to TotalEnergies' CCS pilot project site, at the Rousse depleted gas reservoir, offers an "immersion into the technical challenges of the CCUS decarbonization chain in 2024... to understand the challenges of scaling up to an industrial level." TotalEnergies' Lacq pilot project ran for just three years, 2010 to 2013, transporting and pumping CO2 from just one industrial 30-thermal megawatt gas boiler at the Lacq industrial complex into the Rousse gas field, costing a whopping €60 million. When CO2 injection stopped in 2013 (after injecting just 51 thousand tonnes – a miniscule fraction of TotalEnergies' annual emissions, estimated between 455 million tonnes and 1.6 billion tonnes in 2019), TotalEnergies only planned to monitor the reservoir for the next three years. The company also boasted that it had it had "worked hand in hand with the French authorities to define a regulatory framework for environmental monitoring." Total describes "social acceptability" as one of the "two prerequisites" for developing CCS on an industrial scale, as "people living next to the installations are worried about incidents liable to occur around the Cos storage sites." Something the Commission with the ICM Forum working group on public perception is keen to help companies with, despite increasing accidents surrounding CO2 transport and storage.

TotalEnergies may claim to be committed to achieving 'climate neutrality' by 2050, but the oil giant is using its record profits to double down on new fossil fuel investments, while spending up to €3 million each year lobbying Brussels. Its costly, tiny and decade-old Lacq CCS pilot project only serves to emphasise the complete lack of industrial scale CCUS projects in Europe, which in total currently capture just 1.9 million tonnes (Mt) CO2 per year (of which 1.7Mt correspond to Sleipner and Snøhvit projects in Norway) – an absurdly far cry from the ICMS' goal of capturing 280 Mt of CO2 by 2040 and 450Mt by 2050 within the EU. That would mean scaling up the CCUS industry 450 times in the next two and half decades – despite the last two and half decades of repeated failures to get industrial-scale CCUS projects off the ground. Failures that the European Court of Auditors concluded wasted hundreds of millions of euros of public funds. What's more, according to industry data, only 52Mt of carbon dioxide has ever been stored long-term globally.

## Fossil free politics needed for real zero

The need for decarbonisation poses an existential threat to the oil and gas industry, which is why they have created multiple 'escape hatches' to continue fossil fuel burning, including techno-fixes like CCUS and carbon removals. And thanks to corporate capture structures like the ICM Forum – which gives the fossil fuel industry an official role in the policy-making process – the EU has taken them fully on board. The result is that Europe is showering public money and policy support on these dangerous distractions designed to keep Big Oil and Gas in business. The ICM Forum has no place in a democratic EU, especially not one capable of meeting its climate justice responsibilities. Rejecting fossil fuel influence is vital if the EU is to deliver real solutions to the climate crisis and reduce carbon emissions down to real zero, instead of the corporate greenwashed 'net zero' that relies on fossil fuel industry delay tactics like CCUS.

