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## Recent GCC Joint Environmental Initiatives

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Environmental sustainability has become an urgent priority for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Faced with climate change, water scarcity, and other environmental challenges, the six member states—Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain—have begun to recognize the importance of collaboration to address these regional challenges. In particular, the period from November 2024 to March 2025 saw significant strides in this direction, as the GCC nations took collective action to address environmental issues, while also pursuing individual efforts to meet their national environmental goals.

The environmental challenges facing the GCC countries are both vast and interconnected. These challenges include extreme temperatures, water scarcity, air pollution, and desertification. Additionally, many GCC nations are heavily dependent on fossil fuel industries, which have historically contributed to high carbon emissions. According to the World Bank's 2025 Gulf economic update, the region's environmental issues are compounded by rapid urbanization and population growth, which place increasing pressure on already strained natural resources.<sup>1</sup>

While each GCC country has pursued individual environmental policies—such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the UAE's Green Agenda 2030, and Qatar's National Climate Change Action Plan—there has been a growing recognition that these issues cannot be tackled in isolation. Instead, environmental sustainability in the Gulf requires regional cooperation and collaboration. The necessity for such collaboration stems from the shared geography and climate of the region. As highlighted by Alam and Azrein (2023), the vast desert landscapes and arid conditions that characterize the Gulf region necessitate a collective approach to sustainable water management, air quality control, and the mitigation of climate change impacts.<sup>2</sup>

### Key Regional Environmental Initiatives (Nov 2024 – Mar 2025)

#### 1. Gulf Blue Carbon Network

In December 2024, Qatar and the UAE spearheaded the creation of the Gulf Blue Carbon Network, a regional initiative aimed at protecting and restoring coastal ecosystems such as mangroves, seagrasses, and salt marshes. These blue carbon ecosystems play a critical role in sequestering carbon, protecting coastal areas from erosion, and supporting marine biodiversity. According to the UAE Ministry of Climate Change and Environment, over \$300 million in green investment has been pledged towards the restoration of mangrove forests in the Gulf.<sup>3</sup>

#### 2. Joint Air Quality Monitoring Grid

Air pollution is a significant issue across the GCC, with cities such as Riyadh, Dubai, and Doha regularly experiencing high levels of particulate matter and other pollutants. In January 2025, the GCC launched a joint air quality monitoring network that spans 36 cities across the region. The network uses state-of-the-art sensors and satellite data to provide real-time information on air quality, which is shared across member states for immediate action. In addition to the air quality monitoring network, several GCC countries, including Saudi Arabia, have pledged to increase their investment in renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind power, to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels and decrease air pollution. The KPMG Energy Transition Investment Outlook (2024) projects that the region will invest over \$60 billion in renewable energy projects by 2026, further contributing to improved air quality.<sup>4</sup>



### 3. GCC Waste-to-Energy Cooperation Protocol

In February 2025, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE signed a protocol to develop a shared waste-to-energy infrastructure. The initiative aims to reduce the environmental impact of landfills, while simultaneously generating renewable energy from waste. The region has been facing a growing waste management challenge, with many cities struggling to handle the increasing volume of municipal solid waste. The waste-to-energy protocol aims to install state-of-the-art facilities to convert waste into clean energy, with a target of diverting 40% of municipal waste from landfills by 2030. Saudi Arabia has already begun construction on the largest waste-to-energy facility in the region, located in Jeddah, which will process up to 3,000 tons of waste per day. This facility is expected to generate over 250 megawatts of renewable energy annually, enough to power 100,000 homes.<sup>5</sup>

### 4. Regional Water Security Task Force

Water scarcity is a critical issue in the GCC, where only a small percentage of the region's water needs are met by renewable sources. The majority of the water supply comes from desalination, but this process is energy-intensive and costly. To address these challenges, the GCC established a regional water security task force in March 2025. The task force's primary goal is to synchronize efforts across the region in the areas of water conservation, desalination, and wastewater recycling. One of the task force's first initiatives is to implement a joint desalination plant powered by renewable energy. The plant, located in Oman, will use solar power to desalinate seawater, reducing the carbon footprint of the desalination process.<sup>6</sup>

### 5. Eco-Cities Collaboration Hub

In early 2025, Saudi Arabia's NEOM, Kuwait's Green Mubarak Al-Kabeer, and the UAE's Masdar City launched the Eco-Cities Collaboration Hub. This initiative aims to share knowledge, technologies, and best practices related to sustainable urban development. The three cities are leaders in sustainable design and infrastructure, and the collaboration hub will allow them to pool their resources and accelerate the development of green technologies.<sup>7</sup> The impact of these joint initiatives is evident in several key statistics. According to the Gulf Cooperation Council Secretariat, environmental investment in the region reached a record \$58 billion between November 2024 and March 2025, with 38% of that investment directed toward regional or multi-country projects. This is a significant increase from the previous year, when only 22% of environmental investments were dedicated to collaborative initiatives.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the number of joint environmental research publications between GCC universities increased by 34% during the same period, reflecting a growing culture of knowledge exchange and collaborative research.<sup>9</sup> These publications cover a wide range of topics, including renewable energy, water management, and climate change mitigation strategies. The establishment of the joint air quality monitoring grid has also yielded positive results. The number of hazardous air quality days in major GCC cities dropped by 8% between November 2024 and March 2025, thanks in part to the data-sharing and pollution control efforts associated with the network.<sup>10</sup>

### Remaining Challenges and Gaps

Despite the progress made, several challenges remain in the path toward deeper environmental cooperation among GCC countries. One of the most significant obstacles is the lack of a unified legal framework for enforcing environmental regulations across the region. While the Green Gulf Pact 2025 has been an important step toward harmonizing environmental policies, it remains a



non-binding agreement, and there is no centralized enforcement body to hold countries accountable for failing to meet their environmental targets.<sup>11</sup>

Another challenge is the uneven distribution of resources among the GCC countries. While the UAE and Saudi Arabia have taken the lead in green investments and sustainable infrastructure development, other countries such as Bahrain and Oman face financial constraints that limit their ability to invest in large-scale environmental projects. The OECD (2025) has suggested that the creation of a regional climate fund could help address these disparities and ensure that all countries in the region can contribute to and benefit from regional environmental initiatives.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, while data-sharing initiatives have been successful, the fragmentation of environmental data systems across countries remains an issue. A unified digital platform for environmental data would streamline decision-making and ensure that the region can respond more effectively to environmental crises as they arise.<sup>13</sup>

### Conclusion

The GCC is undertaking notable progress in fostering regional environmental cooperation. Spearheaded by a shared sense of urgency to address climate change and environmental degradation, the GCC recently launched several impactful joint initiatives. The momentum should now be taken forward by focusing on the development of a unified legal and regulatory framework across the GCC, establishing a joint environmental fund and centralized data hub to support cross-border projects, and promoting technology transfer, innovation partnerships, and public engagement to accelerate sustainable solutions and foster a culture of environmental responsibility throughout the region.

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