UEFA’s €500m Qatar Airways deal pollutes like a coal-fired power plant

UEFA club competitions’ dirty sponsors

While UEFA is responsible for safeguarding the future of football, it is choosing short term revenue over long term stability in the face of the existential threat of climate change. This briefing details how its decisions have left fans and football itself exposed to harm. The briefing gives an overview of all polluting sponsors in UEFA's three club competitions and highlights UEFA's own deal with Qatar Airways, other airline sponsors and the rise of polluting cryptocurrency sponsors in European football.

Despite its commitment to cut emissions by 50% by 2030, and its President proclaiming that "that football has the potential to dramatically shift mindsets on climate change", UEFA embraces polluting sponsors. Chief among these is Qatar Airways, which has reportedly paid €500m to promote long-haul flying in the Champions League until 2030. We calculate that this deal alone will produce 20.2m CO_2e tonnes of pollution, meaning annual emissions on par with that of a coal fired power station. Notably, this sponsorship highlights that progress to cut pollution by closing down polluting coal plants is being undercut by the continued promotion of fossil fuel dependent choices like flying. Harmful advertising also comes from banks that profit from financing fossil fuels, cruise lines, SUV manufacturers, other airlines and cryptocurrency brands. UEFA has also greatly increased the pollution for which it is directly responsible by expanding the number of matches played. Accordingly, we call on clubs and UEFA to end the promotion of harmful activities and use their platform and resources to help preserve a climate fit for football's future.

The climate crisis is a fundamental threat to the future of the world's most popular sport. Football depends on safe playing conditions and stable community clubs that allow the next generation to become committed players and passionate fans. But increasingly frequent and serious extreme weather means more and more of football is being hurt by flooding, rain or dangerous heat. The headline-grabbing collapse of AFC Wimbledon's pitch is indicative of the threat football faces; but most instances in which matches are cancelled or played in unsafe conditions fly under the radar. The health of the game depends on the huge reductions in fossil fuel pollution that are needed to avoid more destabilising climate change. This means reorienting the behaviour of corporations, governments and people everywhere, a task that football is uniquely well positioned to drive, given its meaning for billions worldwide. Yet the sport's potential to make change also leaves it vulnerable to exploitation from those who seek to maintain the fossil fuelled status quo.

Sponsorship sending harmful messages to huge audiences

Football sponsorships offer a unique chance to normalise and promote certain choices and activities to the hundreds of millions who watch UEFA competitions. Research has proven that supporters come to associate the positive feelings they hold toward their team with the brands these teams choose to promote. But this is problematic if the things being promoted actually cause harm, especially to those beyond the individual actually choosing the harmful product. The ongoing promotion of high-carbon activities is out of step with international efforts to hugely reduce demand for fossil fuels in the next few years. Industries that rely on the burning of fossil fuels for their profit are concerned that their business model has no place in a decarbonised future. As such, they are eager to continue to promote their high carbon products, push back social consensus against them and maintain public image despite growing concern about the climate crisis.

There is considerable precedent for action to prevent activity deemed harmful from being promoted through advertising. Sport was saturated with marketing from tobacco companies until the weight of scientific and social consensus overwhelmed resistance from vested interests to regulate and ban it. Given that it is acknowledged that global heating is extremely dangerous (to both football and wider society) and is primarily caused by fossil fuel pollution, it is necessary for a tobacco style ban on fossil fuel sponsorship to be implemented to protect people and planet as well as safeguarding the future of the sport itself. The UN Secretary-General recently endorsed this policy, calling for "every country to ban advertising from fossil fuel companies".

The full list of harmful polluting sponsors is below, divided into various categories. Airlines and even airports partner with many clubs, while long-haul travel destinations such as ‘Visit Rwanda’, ‘Experience Abu Dhabi’ and ‘Auberge Resorts Collection’ are also included in the list of polluting sponsors because they promote holidays dependent on long-haul flights. Banks that profit from financing fossil fuel developments are an important partner in the pollution chain. 11 clubs promote the worst offenders including Deutsche Bank, Crédit Agricole and HSBC. Elsewhere, teams promote fossil fuelled cars that pollute our cities and heat the planet; brands including BMW, Audi and INEOS Grenadier feature alongside various car dealerships who play their part in promoting the sale of large SUVs that are so damaging to the climate. 23 clubs (nearly one quarter) are sponsored by corporations that deal in petrochemicals or fossil fuels themselves, including Athletic Club (Petronor oil and gas company), Fenerbahce (Petrol Ofisi petrol stations) and TSC (Mol oil and gas). The world’s biggest plastic polluter Coca-Cola sponsors several Champions League clubs including Liverpool, Real Madrid and Bayern Munich. Notably, many brands centre sustainability in their marketing while continuing to profit from deep involvement with fossil fuels. These include BP Pulse, arm of mega-polluter BP and sponsor of Tottenham, Volkswagen (Malmo) and MAN (Bayern). Finally, as discussed below, cryptocurrency sponsorship is also commonplace, with teams from Barcelona to Atalanta and Galatasaray promoting these polluting digital products.

Qatar Airways deal does harm to people and our planet

Reducing demand for flying is a vital step in cutting planet-warming pollution. Unlike other sectors, such as road and rail, there is no credible plan to decarbonise air travel. Overall, airline emissions are surging and are on track to eat up 10% of the global ‘carbon budget’ by 2050 (meaning 10% of all the pollution that can be released while still keeping heating to 1.5°C). Flying is an elite activity; only a tiny percentage of the global population ever travel by air, but everyone is harmed by the pollution it causes (and non-flyers in the Global South are most vulnerable). Unfortunately, the promotion of air travel is common among football clubs, associations and competitions. In the Champions League alone, 16 teams plus the league itself have an airline sponsor. The teams are Arsenal, Liverpool, Man. City, Atlético Madrid, FC Barcelona, Girona, Real Madrid, Borussia Dortmund, Atalanta, Inter. Milan, AC Milan, PSG, Sturm Graz, PSV, Benfica and Shakhtar Donetsk.

For its part, UEFA has recently signed a deal, worth a reported €500 million, with Qatar Airways to advertise in the Champions League until at least 2030. Here, we quantify the 'advertised emissions' linked to money invested in sponsorship to reveal the damage that this partnership really does. The logic is that businesses don't invest money without an expectation of at least a baseline expansion in revenue. Using the value of each deal as well as the emissions of that airline and their revenue, the expansion in flights expected as a result of the sponsorship expenditure can be calculated. We estimate that this €500m sponsorship deal will result in 4,390 more flights annually, resulting in pollution by at least 20.2m tonnes of CO_2e by 2030, or about the same amount of pollution of one coal fired power station every year. Notably, this deal came just before the final coal station closed in the U.K; so as one huge source of pollution is switched off, another begins with the full backing of UEFA and European football.

The partnership means that millions of people worldwide will be pushed to fly when they engage with football's top club competition, despite UEFA's stated commitment to sustainability as a founding member of the UNFCCC Sports for Climate Action framework. Under the framework, UEFA must cut emissions by 50% by 2030 and reach net-zero by 2040. It is also obliged to 'Promote Responsible Consumption', a commitment that it appears clearly in breach of given the new deal. Generally, UEFA's decision to partner with Qatar Airways seems to indicate that it has no intention of seriously reducing its pollution impact, despite the harm that the climate crisis is already causing in football. The organisation is joined in promoting Qatar Airways by Inter Milan and PSG (which is also majority owned by a Qatari government backed investment fund).

This choice of partner is even more harmful given that Qatar Airways is wholly owned by the government of Qatar. The €500m deal therefore empowers and enriches a regime that does real and obvious harm. Qatar's huge fossil fuel industry helps make it the most polluting country in the world per capita. Its government is desperate to preserve and build its immense fossil fuel wealth despite the climate crisis. It has therefore worked strategically to strengthen its geopolitical power and influence to maximise profit from fossil fuels and delay climate action. UEFA is complicit in the injustice of a country enriching itself while endangering others by continuing to sell as much fossil fuels as possible.

Beyond climate concerns, human rights organisations have documented systematic violations by the Qatari government including the habitual exploitation of migrant workers, lack of freedom of expression, discrimination against women and criminalisation of LGBTI people. Qatar has used sport as part of a broader strategy to increase its global influence that also included widespread corruption and bribery of officials at FIFA and in European politics. Importantly, there is precedent for a fan-led response to Qatari sportswashing, with the German and Danish national teams taking public stances for human rights at the Qatar World Cup. Bayern Munich fans also campaigned against their club's partnership with Qatar Airways which led to the club agreeing not to renew the sponsorship deal.

Crypto: a new source of pollution and harm for football and fans

Sponsors related to cryptocurrency are heavily promoted in each of the three UEFA club competitions. UEFA and 22 clubs across the competitions in question are sponsored by cryptocurrency exchange platforms that contribute to the promotion and profit from the buying and selling of these assets. Despite not having physical form, these products also have a serious pollution impact. Cryptocurrency relies on the creation of new coins via ‘mining’ processes that use huge computing power. Demand for electricity to run the computers and cooling processes required could generate 0.7% of global emissions by 2027; a huge addition to global pollution considering the infancy of the industry.

Cryptocurrencies are known for their extreme volatility, risk and dubious practices, but some crypto related entities are seeking to legitimise and normalise their product through association with elite football. Socios is a dominant player in the space and has partnered with many clubs in European competition as well as UEFA to market itself to football fans. It is a leading provider of ‘fan tokens’, club specific digital assets that give holders certain exclusive benefits. Fans must buy Socios tokens using cryptocurrency and so become exposed to dramatic fluctuations in value as they are bought and sold. The tokens are marketed as a new way for clubs to show their loyalty because they are not only a piece of club merchandise but entitle their owners to vote on small-scale decisions including messages to be written on the captain’s armband, warm-up songs or the name of a training pitch. But supporters groups have criticised this model, saying that fans should not have to spend (more) money to have a say on what their club does. There have also been instances in which token values surge before quickly collapsing. This leaves supporters motivated by club loyalty exposed to financial risk. A spike in interest from buyers chasing quick returns can inflate a token’s value before mass sell offs quickly crash it. This may leave genuine fans holding greatly depreciated assets. Buying tokens not only links fans and the clubs that promote them to the pollution that comes from mining cryptocurrency but exposes fans to financial risk for questionable returns.

New format drives up UEFA's direct pollution impact

Every continental competitive match means more planet warming pollution from stadium operations and the travel of thousands of fans, players and officials. The pressing need to cut back fossil fuels therefore implies a necessary reduction in the total number of international games organised. But instead, and despite its commitments to halve its emissions by 2030, UEFA has chosen to significantly expand the competitions it oversees. 177 games have been added this season across the Champions, Europa and Conference Leagues (which was only introduced in 2021). BBC research found that the expansion would mean at least 500,000 tonnes of additional transport pollution resulting from 500 million extra air miles travelled. This figure is likely to be a significant under-estimate given it does not include the pollution associated with stadium operations, the travel of away fans in excess of the 5% minimum allocation required, approximately 18 million domestic supporters, fans flying in from beyond Europe, as well as the travel of media and officials and those taking less sustainable business class and charter travel options.

Alternatively, we advocate for a competition with a lighter, regionalised schedule that would mean less direct pollution and allow much more cleaner travel by rail and road. The total number of teams for each competition should be reduced to 24, and qualifiers (which currently entail 133 matches) should be dropped in favour of direct qualification based on league position. Combining these changes with a regionalised group phase would make a significant dent in travel and other emissions.

Importantly, support for a revised football calendar comes from across football. On the first Champions League matchday this season, Bayern Munich fans called on UEFA to get "Back to the roots, undo new CL format" because it brings "too many games", "too much workload", "too much complexity" and "too much injustice". Various top players, managers and pundits have also asserted that far too many matches are currently being played.

Just as the planet is stretched to breaking point, so too are players reaching their physical limits. FIFA, like UEFA, has increased the number of matches in its competitions. In response, FIFPro, the global union for professional footballers, has launched legal action against it over its control of the international calendar and introduction of an expanded Club World Cup in June and July 2025.

Premier League stars have spoken out on their concerns over match schedules. Liverpool's Allison said that "nobody asks the players what they think about adding more games" and "everybody knows what we think about having more games. Everybody's tired of that". Manchester City's Manuel Akanji joked about having to retire at 30 because of the schedule, while teammate Rodri explained that players "are close" to strike action because playing "70, maybe 80" matches a season makes "it impossible to sustain the physical level" and "when the amount of games starts getting bigger, the performance and quality are lower". According to those at the top of the game, a revised football calendar would have the benefit of producing higher quality matches as well as reducing football's huge environmental impact.

Polluting sponsors in UEFA club competitions 2024/25

- NB: Listed sponsorships obtained on club websites and / or SportBusiness database where they remain live as of publication.
- Teams without polluting sponsors not included.
- Internal Combustion Engine (ICE) Vehicles rely on fossil fuels. Both manufacturers and distributors are listed.
- All banks listed are included in Banking on Climate Chaos report that lists financial institutions that most heavily fund fossil fuels.
- Coca-Cola produces the most plastics waste worldwide, and is categorised with petrochemicals and fossil fuel products.

Club	Airline / Airport / Long Haul Travel	ICE Vehicles	Petrochemicals / Fossil Fuel Products	Fossil Fuel Financing Banks	Crypto. Products
UEFA Champions League	Qatar Airways				Crypto.com
Aston Villa FC					Socios.com
Liverpool FC	Japan Airlines		Coca-Cola	Standard Chartered	
Manchester City	Etihad Airways, Experience Abu Dhabi	Nissan			OKX, Socios.com
Atletico Madrid	Riyadh Air	Hyundai		CaixaBank	Kraken Digital Asset Exchange, Socios.com
FC Barcelona	Vueling			CaixaBank, ScotiaBank	WhiteBit, Chiliz
Girona FC	Etihad AIrways	Nissan		CaixaBank	
Real Madrid	Emirates, Visit Dubai	BMW	Coca-Cola		
Bayern Munich	Visit Rwanda	Audi, MAN	CocaCola		
Borussia Dortmund	Eurowings		Aral, Coca-Cola		BlockDAG, Coinbase, Football Metaverse
RB Leipzig		BMW Group Plant Leipzig, MAN Truck & Bus			Kraken Digital Asset Exchange
Bayer Bayer Leverkusen		MG Motor	Indian Oil Corporation		
VfB Stuttgart		Mercedes-Benz, Porsche			
Atalanta BC	Milan Bergamo Airport	Volvo		Intesa Sanpaolo	Zondacrypto

Bologna FC		Volvo			
FC Internazionale Milano	Qatar Airways, Visit Qatar	Volvo			Gate.io, Chiliz, Fan Tokens, Socios.com, BlockDAG
Juventus F.C					Socios.com, Zondacrypto
AC Milan	Emirates, MSC Cruises	BMW	Eneos		Socios.com
Stade Brestois		BMW dealership, Volkswagen dealership, Mercedes-Benz dealership		Crédit Mutuel Arkéa	
AS Monaco		Renault			Rarecubes
PSG	Qatar Airways, Visit Rwanda				Brilliantcrypto, Socios.com
RB Salzburg		Audi			
SK Sturm Graz	Graz Airport				
Feyenoord		BMW/Mini (Breeman)			
PSV	Corendon, Eindhoven Airport	BMW (Van Laarhoven)			
S.L Benfica	Emirates				Socios.com
Sporting CPP			Repsol		
FC Shakhtar Donetsk	SkyUp airlines		Ukrnafta		
FK Crvena Zvezda			Gazprom		
LOSC Lille				Crédit Mutuel	

UEFA Europa League

Club	Airline / Airport / Long Haul Travel	ICE Vehicles	Petrochemicals / Fossil Fuel Products	Fossil Fuel Financing Banks	Crypto. Products
AFC Ajax	Curacao (tourism)	BMW Group			
R.S.C. Anderlecht	Brussels Airlines	Eurostar 2000 Mercedes-Benz			

Athletic Club	Vueling	Toyota Motor	Petronor, Coca-Cola		
AZ Alkmaar		Dusseldorp BMW			
Beşiktaş J.K.		Honda			
S.C. Braga			Repsol		
FC Dynamo Kyiv		MG Motor			
IF Elfsborg		Toveks Bil	Paroy		
Fenerbahçe SK			Alpet , Petrol ofisi		
Ferencvárosi TC		Volkswagen			
Eintracht Frankfurt	SunExpress Airlines	Hyundai		Deutsche Bank	
Galatasaray S.K			SOCAR, petrol ofisi		Arkham
TSG Hoffenheim		Audi			
S.S. Lazio	Aeroitalia				Binance
Olympique Lyonnais	Emirates	MG Motor			
Malmo FF		Volkswagen			
Manchester United	Malaysia Airlines, Visit Malta				Tezos
OGC Nice		Ineos Grenadier	INEOS	Crédit Agricole	
PAOK					Millionero
FC Porto		Suzuki	Repsol		
Real Sociedad		Irizar Toyota (Euskoauto)	Fuel Truck, Coca-Cola		Socios.com
Roma	Riyadh Season, Auberge Resorts Collection	Toyota	Q8		Socios.com

Slavia Praha		MG			
Tottenham Hotspur		Ineos Grenadier	Castrol, BP Pulse (EV arm of BP), Coca-Cola	HSBC	Socios.com, Kraken Digital Asset Exchange
Union SG	Brussels Airlines	D'Ieteren, Cupra			
Viktoria Plzen		Porsche Plzen			

UEFA Conference League

Team	Airline / Airport / Long Haul Travel	ICE Vehicles	Petrochemicals / Fossil Fuel Products	Fossil Fuel Financing Banks	Crypto. Products
APOEL FC			Petrolina		
İstanbul Başakşehir F.K.	Turkish Airlines				
FK Borac Banja Luka		Verano Motors			
NK Celje	Palma (tourism)				
Cercle Brugge K.S.V.		Volvo Automobilia	Coca-Cola		
Chelsea FC	MSC Cruises				
F.C Copenhagen		Audi			
Dinamo-Minsk	Minsk National Airport	Audi			
ACF Fiorentina			Petroli Firenze		
KAA Gent		Hyundai	Coca-Cola		

Heart of Midlothian FC	Loveholidays	Western Mercedes Benz			
FC Heidenheim		Dacia Baumgartner	Kling Energie, Coca-Cola		
HJK Helsinki	Turkish Airlines				
Jagiellonia Białystok		ASW Wojciula, Volvo			
LASK		Geyrhofer and Sohn, Hoglinger Denzel	DopGas		
Legia Warsaw		Grupa Chodzen, Toyota	PGNig Grupa Orlen		
FC Lugano		Autors			
Mlada Boleslav		Skoda			
Molde FK		Toyota Molde			
NK Olimpija Ljubljana		Porsche Verovskova			
Panathinaikos			Coca-Cola		
Petrocub* (sponsors unavailable)					

Real Betis		Volvo	Coca-Cola	CaixaBank	
Shamrock Rovers		Hyundai			
The New Saints	Liverpool John Lennon Airport				
TSC		Isuzu X-tim	Mol		
Vitoria SC		NorteCar			

Appendix

Calculating the climate impact of a sponsorship deal

Knowing a company's total emissions of greenhouse gases makes it possible to calculate how much extra CO2e a certain investment, including investments into sponsorships, advertising and commercial partnerships, is likely to generate.

When a company makes a decision about an investment, for example whether to invest in a sponsorship agreement or an advertising campaign or not, the company has to weigh the present costs against future profits. This is not an easy task as there are always many unknown factors at play but in the end, no sound corporate executive would allow a cost that is not expected, sooner or later, to produce a reasonable return. The investment not only needs to increase the revenue with the same amount, as the income will first have to pay for the increased production costs. It will also have to generate a profit of a certain size.

So, what is a reasonable return? The lowest rate of return a project or investment must achieve before a manager or investor deems it acceptable is called the hurdle rate or the minimum acceptable rate of return. The hurdle rate is company specific and is influenced by factors such as cost of capital, alternative opportunities and risk.

Profit margins will be different between branches, between companies and even over time for the same company. No one knows what the profit margin of any given company will be the next year or the year after but it is a quite reasonable assumption that any company will expect its profit margin to be equal to its cost of capital as a minimum.

A common way to determine a minimum hurdle rate is to use the Weighted Average Cost of Capital (WACC). The WACC represents a company's 17 average after-tax cost of capital from all sources, including common stock, preferred stock, bonds, and other forms of debt. In other words, any investment with a return below WACC would be a bad investment.

The WACC is also company specific and may vary with time and circumstances. However, an analysis of available data shows that WACCs, at least in OECD countries, have a tendency to aggregate around 7 percent. KPMG makes a very thorough assessment of WACCs in the German-speaking countries of Europe surveying 322 companies in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The 2023 issue shows a spread in yearly averages between 6.6 and 8.8 percent with a ten year average of 7.1 percent In a 2023 report, 18 investment bank Morgan Stanley assesses the WACC of the companies included in the Russell 3000 over a period from 1985 to 2022. The average is 7.9 percent but the curve is slightly declining .

In January 2024, the New York University Stern School of Business made a very wide assessment of the cost of capital for 6,481 US based companies, determining the average cost of capital for the total market at 7.00 percent.

According to the OECD, the WACC for major oil companies as well as for the automobile industry oscillates around seven percent. This briefing therefore uses an expected WACC of seven percent in all its calculations. A general formula to calculate emissions per sponsorship for a specific company can thus be expressed as:

$$\frac{CO2e}{EURsp} = \frac{CO2etot}{(WACC \times REVtot)}$$

where:

$CO2etot$ = the combined (scope 1, 2 and 3) yearly carbon dioxide equivalent emissions[21] of the company; 53

$WACC$ = the Weighted Average Cost of Capital, estimated to be 7.0%;

$REVtot$ = the company's gross revenue.

It is important to note that the climate impacts of sponsorships calculated with this method should be seen as quite conservative for a number of reasons:

- The 7.0 percent of return should be taken as a minimum and most corporate executives will likely be hoping for a better return on investments.
- Every sponsorship manager knows that the sum that is provided to the sponsee is only one part of the whole cost. One US study showed that sponsors spent an average $2.20 extra for every $1 paid in the sponsorship deal. If it is not followed up by other marketing activities, promotions, staff activities etc, it will only be money down the drain.
- A sponsoring company will be eager to use what it has “bought”. The more the asset is used, the more benefit the company will draw; and the more investments will need to be returned.

Qatar Airways

Qatar Airways’s scope 3 emissions are likely significantly higher than those reported. The airline only includes waste to landfill and transport emissions in its reporting of its upstream and downstream supply chain.

Airlines with greater levels of transparency usually report most of their scope 3 emissions from the kerosene supply chain, along with the manufacturing of aircrafts and engines.

Carbon footprint for the year 2022 in thousand tonnes CO2e:

Scope 1	Scope 1 + non-CO2	Scope 2	Scope 3	Total including non-CO2
18,368	**55,104**	263	**98**	**55,465**

Qatar Airways's total revenue for fiscal year 2022 was € 19,596 million.

Based on Qatar Airways's reported carbon footprint and its reported total revenue we can calculate that each sponsorship deal with Qatar Airways will generate emissions of 40.4 kg CO2e per sponsor €, or 47.3 kg CO2e per sponsor £.

This means that their reported €500m spend equates to 20.2bn kilograms of CO2e, or 20.2 million tonnes.

The average coal-fired power plant emits 3.5 million tonnes of CO2 each year. So if this deal runs until the end of the 2029 / 30 season in June 2030 (a period of 5.75 years) it will annually cause as much pollution as the average coal plant (20.2m / 5.75 years = 3.5m tonnes each year).

We used the following calculations to come to the number of flights this sponsorship deal will add.

Calculating additional flights from CL sponsorship

- Investment Amount: €500 million
- WACC: 7%
- Profit: $1.540 billion
- Total Flights: 179,000 per year

Calculating for additional flights

Expected Profit = Investment x WACC
Investment in USD = 500 million x 1.08 = 540 million USD
Expected Profit = 540 million x 0.07 = 37.8 million USD

Profit per flight

Profit per Flight = Total Profit / Total Flights
Profit per Flight = 1.540 billion/ 179,000 ≅ 8,607.26 USD

Additional flights

Additional Flights = Expected Profit / Profit per Flight
Additional Flights = 37.8 million / 8,607.26 ≅ 4,390 Flights

Fossil Free Football

Fossil Free Football is a fan-led campaign group committed to breaking up football's ties with big polluters.

Game Changer Sponsorship Pledge

A sponsorship pledge mobilising fans, athletes, clubs and organisations to bring an end to high-carbon, gambling and alcohol sponsorship in sport.

Badvertising

'Badvertising' is a campaign to stop adverts fuelling the climate emergency.