Industry leaders call for ‘radical rethink’ as new data reveals widening confidence in hitting sustainability goals

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A new study has revealed that fewer than one in ten sustainability professionals feel confident their organisations will achieve their climate goals, as shrinking budgets, team shortages and lack of senior support continue to stall progress.

The True State of Sustainability 2025 report, published by UK consultancy network Leafr (www.leafr.com), draws on anonymous insights from 450 sustainability leads across Europe, including chief sustainability officers, ESG consultants and corporate responsibility managers.

Key findings include:

- 11% confident in hitting long- or short-term targets (down from 25% in 2024).
- 76% say their teams are under-resourced.
- 91% have been asked to take on tasks outside their expertise.
- C-suite buy-in has halved since last year.
- 37% cite lack of regulation as a blocker to progress.

The report comes at a time when the global sustainability discourse is shifting from rhetoric to results. After years of target setting and disclosure frameworks, many businesses are now confronting the harder reality of delivery. The conversation has evolved beyond distant targets toward the systems, skills and accountability needed to achieve measurable impact.

Mike Barry, Co-founder of Planeatry Alliance and former Director of Sustainable Business at M&S, said:

“The Leafr True State Report is a refreshing dousing with cold water – an honest appraisal of the state of the sustainable business profession. The public holding of sustainability targets remains important, but the worry grows that truly transformative action is still stalled at the start line.”

Dr Mary Johnstone-Louis, Senior Fellow in Management Practice at the University of Oxford’s Saïd Business School, added:

“Leafr’s new report is clear: leaders with a compliance-led approach to sustainability put their companies at risk. What’s needed is not a minor adjustment, but a radical rethink. Leaders who act on Leafr’s recommendations now will be the ones shaping, not chasing, the future.”

Gus Bartholomew, Leafr co-founder, said:

“The data confirms what we hear from our community every day. Sustainability teams cannot deliver net zero on their own. They are under-resourced, pulled in too many directions, and forced into compliance work at the expense of impact. Unless leadership, regulators, and investors align behind a pragmatic model that values environmental outcomes as much as financial ones, targets will remain out of reach.”

Nick Valenzia, Leafr co-founder, added:

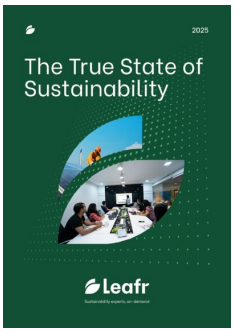
“The problem is not a lack of ambition: it’s a broken delivery model. Boards would never accept financial accounts prepared by unqualified staff, yet they entrust multi-million-pound sustainability strategies to under-trained, overstretched generalists. If we are serious about delivering our commitments we need to match resourcing with rhetoric.”

The True State of Sustainability Report is a wake-up call for businesses, policymakers, investors, and the profession itself. The findings highlight the need for systemic collaboration, regulatory clarity, and smarter use of external expertise and technology.

The full report can be downloaded, here: https://www.leafr.com/the-true-state-of-sustainability-repor...

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