

East Africa's busiest trade route, the Northern Corridor, is on a mission to go green.

Stretching from the Kenyan port of Mombasa through Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and into eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the 1,700-kilometre corridor carries billions of dollars' worth of goods every year—but also produces millions of tonnes of harmful carbon emissions.

Now, the Northern Corridor Transit and Transport Coordination Authority (NCTTCA) has launched a Green Freight Strategy aimed at cutting these emissions and turning the corridor into a cleaner, safer, and more climate-friendly route by 2050.

According to a new emissions baseline survey supported by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), freight-related transport emissions along the corridor reached 3.76 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2024. Kenya accounted for the largest share, emitting 2.59 million tonnes, followed by Uganda with 0.83 million tonnes and Rwanda with 0.34 million tonnes.

Speaking during a stakeholder forum in Nairobi, NCTTCA Executive Secretary John Deng said the most polluting routes were found in Kenya, with the Mombasa–Nairobi stretch responsible for 1.58 million tonnes and Nairobi–Malaba for 0.93 million tonnes. In Uganda, emissions were highest along the Malaba–Busia–Kampala and Busia–Malaba–Elegu routes. In Rwanda, the Kigali–Rusizi corridor topped the list.

These key transport links account for nearly 90 percent of all emissions along the Northern Corridor, a pattern that aligns with previous assessments showing high freight traffic volumes concentrated along these main arteries. Similar emissions surveys are underway in Burundi, the DRC, and South Sudan, which are also part of the corridor network.

The new strategy aims to reduce carbon emissions intensity by 10 percent by 2030, improve fuel efficiency in freight operations, and cut levels of harmful pollutants such as black carbon and nitrogen oxides by 12 percent. It also sets out to enhance the climate resilience of at least 2,000 kilometres of road infrastructure and train over 1,000 truck drivers in eco-driving techniques to promote safety and fuel conservation.

Deng said that with better driving practices, smarter route planning, and greater

awareness, drivers and transport companies can significantly lower emissions while improving operational efficiency. The strategy not only targets emissions but also addresses air quality, traffic safety, and long-term sustainability for the region's logistics systems.

The transport sector is one of the fastest-growing sources of greenhouse gas emissions in East Africa. Experts warn that if no action is taken, freight emissions could double by 2050, threatening both climate goals and public health. Reducing emissions along the Northern Corridor is seen as essential for the region to meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement and align with the African Union's Agenda 2063.

Environmental scientists have welcomed the plan, noting that transport emissions are a leading cause of poor air quality in urban centers and along major highways. Reducing them could significantly improve respiratory health for communities living near these routes, while also helping countries meet their climate pledges.

Despite the bold vision, implementing the strategy will require strong collaboration between governments, the private sector, and regional bodies. Many small and medium-sized transporters may need financial and technical support to adopt cleaner technologies and improve fleet efficiency.

Still, authorities remain optimistic that with coordinated action, the region's main trade corridor can become a model for sustainable logistics in Africa. "We can't afford to wait," Deng said. "A cleaner, smarter corridor is not just a dream — it's a necessity."