



U.S. Poised to Act on Climate Change

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U.S. President George W. Bush delivered a speech in April acknowledging the challenges presented by climate change, but he offered no policies for addressing the problem. He called for America “to stop the growth of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by 2025,” leaving the world to assume that U.S. emissions would continue to grow unabated for 17 years with no regulations to ensure that action is taken even then. For many across the United States, it was a disappointment. But while Washington seems paralyzed on this issue, pressure is growing for aggressive climate action at other levels across the country.

In the same week that President Bush delivered his climate address, a bipartisan group of governors of 20 states met at Yale University to sign the “Governors’ Declaration on Climate Change.” They called for the federal government to join states in developing cost-effective programs to drastically reduce greenhouse-gas emissions nationwide. They also encouraged Congress and the President to develop regulations to move the country forward quickly toward a new energy economy. Meanwhile, mayors in more than 800 U.S. cities have signed the “Mayors’ Climate Protection Agreement,” which endorses the goals of the Kyoto Protocols.

Industry calls for mandatory action

In the private sector, representatives from some of the biggest corporations in the United States have issued “A Call for Action,” urging the federal government to confront climate change. The United States Climate Action Partnership, which includes Alcoa, General Motors Corp., Caterpillar Inc., Ford Motor Co., General Electric, BP America Inc., Duke Energy, ConocoPhillips, PepsiCo, Siemens Corp., Xerox, Johnson & Johnson, DuPont, Deere & Co., Dow Chemical and other major corporations, has issued recommendations for a cap-and-trade program, mandatory emissions reduction targets, incentives for improved energy efficiency across the economy, and subsidies for rapid development of new technologies.

Still, despite the drumbeat of support for climate action, little is expected from Congress or the White House in 2008. Washington is too preoccupied with election-year politics. That means in 2009 the new president and Congress will need to act quickly. With this in mind, a national non-partisan organization, the Presidential Climate Action Project, is amassing the best research on climate science and public policy, and developing a full slate of recommendations for action by the next president.

The U.S. lags behind in an enormous challenge

The challenges are enormous. More than half of America's power is generated by burning coal, which produces about 40 percent of the carbon dioxide emissions nationwide. By some estimates, buildings in the United States are 30 percent less energy efficient than their European counterparts. American cars also are less efficient than those in Europe, and a third of the country's greenhouse gas emissions come from transportation. More than 10 percent of the world's oil is going into America's gas tanks. Per capita energy use and greenhouse gas emissions are twice as high in the United States as they are in the European Union.

Maybe most confounding, though, is the structure of the U.S. economy itself. With its performance measured in terms of growth, sustainability rarely has been part of the balance sheet. Consumption of energy, water, land, and other resources has fuelled that economic growth as if the Earth's supplies have no limits. But a survey of business leaders released by the McKinsey Quarterly in April revealed that those assumptions are changing. The future availability of natural resources has jumped from seventh to second in the past year on the lists of the most pressing concerns of the world's business executives. Clearly, the time is ripe for the United States to begin transitioning to a new economic model.

New ambitious goals and a wide range of proposals

The Presidential Climate Action Project, which was launched in 2007 and is headquartered at the University of Colorado Denver, is informed by a broad-based coalition of scientists and public policy experts. They have proposed audacious changes in federal policy to confront climate change. They are calling for a transformation of the economy from one "addicted to oil," as Bush so famously has said, to one fueled by renewable energy and built on standards of efficiency that rival the best in the world.

The policy proposals range from eliminating subsidies and tax breaks for the mature energy industry to ordering an overhaul of federal infrastructure management to make government buildings, activities and fleets carbon neutral. The goal is to reduce

greenhouse gas emissions nationwide by 30 percent by 2020 and by 90 percent by 2050. To achieve those goals, the plan calls for average vehicle efficiency standards to be 50 miles per gallon by 2020. By then it also calls for at least 20 percent of the country's electricity to come from renewable sources. Incentives would encourage building retrofits to achieve dramatic improvements in energy efficiency and to accelerate technological advances in the development of renewable energy sources. The Presidential Climate Action Project proposes other policy changes in the arenas of international relations, national security, education, resource management, agriculture and others.

Have the plan on the desk when the president moves in

Advisors for the three remaining presidential candidates have agreed to attend a briefing on the national security implications of climate change, sponsored by the Presidential Climate Action Project and scheduled for July in Washington, D.C. A number of America's top climate scientists and security experts will conduct the briefing, including Adm. Richard Truly, former administrator of NASA and former director of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory; Gary Hart, U.S. Senator (retired) and a scholar at the Wirth Chair at the University of Colorado Denver; Ray Anderson, one of America's leading green industrialists and chair of the Presidential Climate Action Project; Dr. Paul Epstein of the Harvard Center for Health and the Global Environment; Dr. Mike MacCracken, chief scientist for climate change programs at the Climate Institute and former director of the U.S. Global Climate Change Research Program; and Dr. Rosina Bierbaum, dean of the School of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Michigan.

The Presidential Climate Action Project will continue to study climate-change policies over the next few months and will release the final draft of its plan for the next president in the fall of 2008. The objective is to give the president a thorough, comprehensive, science-based agenda for effective climate action to be implemented in the first 100 days of the new administration. It's a bold, ambitious strategy, but the United States has to make up for a lot of lost time.

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