

## A Climate Change Agenda for the Next U.S. Administration

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With both the fact and consequences of climate change now abundantly clear to all rational observers at home and abroad, it is time for effective action, not more rhetoric. To be effective, that action requires U.S. participation and leadership. No such leadership will be forthcoming under a Trump administration. But any successor Democratic administration will need a specific agenda to address climate change if it is to have any chance of reversing the catastrophic consequences of continued climate blindness by our federal government. The recent release of climate proposals by some of the Democratic contenders is certainly a major step forward, but none of those plans is really adequate to address the challenge either.

Here, instead, is a 15-point program to address both climate mitigation (reduction of greenhouse gases) and climate adaptation (helping the U.S. and the world adapt to the now inevitable impacts of climate change) that the next U.S. administration should aggressively pursue:

### U.S. Domestic Programs

1. The U.S. should buy (or condemn) and close all domestic coal plants. This would be much faster and more certain than trying to close those plants through legislation or regulation. It would also be cheaper in the long run because of both the health and environmental benefits of closing these obsolete plants. All miners and coal plant workers would be guaranteed jobs closing and then remediating the plants and would also be eligible for college tuition grants and mortgage and car loan relief. There is no reason why these workers should bear the burden of our new national policy. Coal company owners would receive the fair market value of their aging facilities, which is better than they would get in bankruptcy or litigation if current trends continue.
  2. Redirect fossil fuel subsidies to renewables. This is a no-brainer and requires nothing more than political will to accomplish it over a period of, say, three years. With coal plants closed, there would be more than enough funds to launch a truly national campaign to expand wind, solar, geothermal and even new-generation nuclear facilities (and the smart grids necessary to maximize their efficiency) so the U.S. could rely entirely on renewable fuels by 2050.
  3. Impose a carbon tax on all fossil fuels. This would both require consumers to bear the costs of fossil fuel use and send a meaningful signal to investors. The carbon tax should include exemptions or refunds for low-income consumers of gas and electricity. Rather than refunding the remaining proceeds to every U.S. family (as some have proposed), those proceeds should be used to assist local communities in adapting to the impacts of climate change.
  4. Reinstitute stringent auto and truck fuel efficiency standards. This is another no-brainer and is necessary not only to address climate change but also to permit our manufacturers to compete in the E.U., China and other markets where fuel efficiency requirements are mandatory.
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5. Impose strict requirements on fracking. Instead of banning fracking, impose strict federal regulatory and disclosure requirements to prevent methane leaks, groundwater contamination and related impacts and then require that an increasing share of natural gas be earmarked each year for export to countries willing to close new or existing coal plants in exchange for natural gas. With the U.S. converting to renewable fuels by 2050, carefully regulated natural gas should be seen as an export product to assist China, India, Indonesia, South Africa and other countries to shed their reliance on coal.
6. Ban offshore oil and gas exploration. Our oceans and marine wildlife are already severely stressed by pollution from offshore oil and gas operations. It is far more important to prevent future pollution than to extract additional natural gas (not to mention oil) from U.S. domestic waters, especially in the arctic, where accidental releases of oil would exacerbate the climate challenges that marine animals already face.
7. Help cities reduce greenhouse gases from buildings. Aside from autos and trucks, buildings are the largest source of greenhouse gases in major cities. These can be significantly reduced through existing techniques, but the cost of doing so is substantial, particularly for existing buildings. Federal assistance is required to help cities carry out the necessary retrofits in a way that protects low-income tenants and homeowners.
8. Create a Climate Adaptation Trust Fund to help cities and states adapt to climate impacts. As the devastation from Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy and Maria showed, no U.S. city, even New York, has the resources to deal alone with the threats of climate-driven storms, sea level rise, heat waves, or destruction of major infrastructure. To avoid that now foreseeable damage, our major cities need to begin now to protect, or relocate, that infrastructure (including transportation and water supply, sanitation and health care facilities) and prepare to relocate vulnerable residential neighborhoods. This cannot be done without assured long-term federal assistance, which should be made available through a newly-chartered Climate Adaptation Trust Fund similar to our Highway Trust Fund.
9. Expand research on carbon and methane removal. There remain serious obstacles to responsible use of technology to remove carbon and methane from the atmosphere, something that is likely to be necessary even with increased efforts to reduce future greenhouse emissions. Federal funding for research and pilot programs is required to overcome those obstacles and to assure that the benefits of new technologies are widely available.
10. Corporate Climate Disclosure. As the pending litigation against Exxon demonstrates, U.S. corporations should be required to disclose to shareholders and the public the impact of their operations and products (from exploration through use and disposal) on climate change and adaptation. Existing state and federal regulations requiring that disclosure should be strengthened, not undermined as under the Trump administration.

### **International Programs**

11. Rejoin the Paris Agreement. This should be done on Day 1 to signal to the world that the U.S. is willing once again to be part of the solution to the gravest long-term threat to human welfare. The U.S. must also take the lead in updating the Paris Agreement—and increasing the commitments of its signatories—in order to have any hope of limiting global temperature increases to even the 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels that the Paris Agreement correctly called the maximum increase that the world can tolerate.
12. Impose an “international financial transaction microtax” to fund climate adaptation in developing countries. The world’s developing countries are projected to bear the most severe impacts of climate change, yet they have the fewest resources to adapt to those impacts on their cities, farms, water and energy supplies and people. The amounts required for that adaptation will require significant long-term funding (amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars annually), which neither the U.S. nor other developed countries are likely to make available through taxpayer-supported appropriations. Because it is in the long-term interest of the U.S. to help developing countries adapt successfully to climate change, the U.S. should take the lead in creating an international financial transaction tax (as proposed by a New York City Bar Association task force) so

to be used to fund responsible climate adaptation projects through the Paris Agreement's Adaptation Fund, the World Bank or other international institutions.

13. Forest Protection. Deforestation has accelerated in Brazil and elsewhere as international pressure to prevent deforestation has waned and domestic politics have undermined existing forest protections. It is critical that this trend be reversed, and the international community needs to provide renewed incentives to help developing countries like Indonesia and Malaysia increase enforcement of forest regimes and provide increased protection for indigenous communities and forest wildlife.

14. Join Global Pacts on Migration and Refugees and Assist Central America. Climate change has already led to tens of millions of migrants, and it is likely that several hundred million people in Central America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia will be forced to leave their homes because of climate impacts in the coming decades. The U.N. has drafted separate Global Pacts on Migration and Refugees that pledge support for vulnerable countries' efforts to remain habitable in the face of climate change and for all nations to share equitably the burden of increasing refugee flows. The U.S. needs to join and help implement these Pacts in order to place international migration on an equitable footing while other efforts to adapt to climate change go forward. The U.S. should also provide targeted funds to our Central American neighbors to help them adapt to climate change at the same time that we help them overcome the lawlessness and violence that impel much of the current migration from that region.

15. Protecting Oceans and Marine Life. Most excess heat from greenhouse gases ends up not in the atmosphere but in the world's oceans, which have been largely ignored in public discussions of climate change. Yet the oceans regulate our climate and provide the marine life that sustains a large share of the Earth's human population. No climate program can be complete without urgently needed attention to preserving marine habitat, reducing industrial pollution of the oceans and protecting dangerously depleted fish stocks through enforceable international agreements. To do this, the U.S. needs to resume its leadership role in protecting both its own coastal waters and the global commons that sustains most life on Earth.

## Conclusion

There are, of course, other compelling environmental issues that a new U.S. administration must address, including cross-state and local air pollution, potable water contamination, protection for endangered species and a healthier (and more local) agricultural sector, which would have important climate mitigation impacts as well. The climate measures outlined above should, however, be the core of an urgent commitment by a new administration (and Congress) to confront a problem that will, unless promptly addressed, overwhelm other national and international concerns. This 15-point program provides a road map for that effort.

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