

---

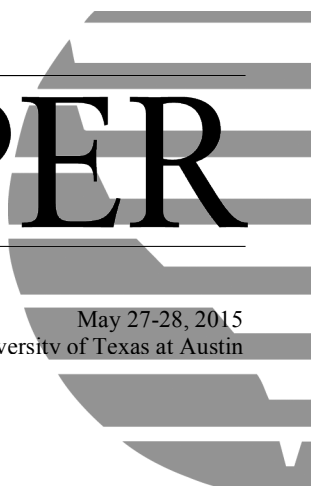
# WORKINGPAPER

---

Sponsored by

The Stanley Foundation and the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin  
Key Regional Actors and Sector Opportunities for International Climate Change Cooperation

May 27-28, 2015  
University of Texas at Austin



## **President Obama's Climate Action Plan—Two Years Later**

by  
**Michael Tubman**  
**Director of Outreach**  
**Center for Climate and Energy Solutions**

## **Introduction**

Two years after President Obama announced his Climate Action Plan, the administration has made marked progress toward achieving its goals. The plan, announced June 25, 2013, outlines 75 goals in three areas: cutting carbon pollution in the United States, preparing the United States for the impacts of climate change, and leading international efforts to address climate change. While in a few cases there is little or no evidence of action to date, at least some progress has been made in most areas, and many of the tasks outlined in the plan have been completed.

Notable areas of progress include steps to limit carbon pollution from power plants; new energy efficiency standards; actions to reduce methane and hydrofluorocarbon (HFC) emissions; the launch of a climate resilience toolkit; and securing significant commitments for climate action from India and China. Areas where there has been no visible progress include strengthening climate resilience in the insurance sector, increasing funding for international climate action, and certain promotions of clean energy and resiliency technologies overseas.

With Congress unlikely to enact major climate legislation in the near term, the Climate Action Plan relies almost entirely on executive powers under existing laws—steps the administration can take on its own. Some of these efforts have been subject to political pushback from opponents in Congress and some states. While efforts to undo executive actions have mostly been unsuccessful, it seems likely Congress will succeed in repealing guidelines on U.S. financing of coal plants overseas.

The nature, scope and ambition of the plan's many elements vary widely. Some are discrete, relatively simple tasks within existing policies and programs; others require the administration to undertake formal rule-making processes; and some are continuations of existing government programs and policies. Achieving some of the plan's goals will require a transformation of the U.S. energy system over a period that will outlast President Obama's time in office.

## **Cutting carbon pollution in the United States**

The first pillar of the plan includes commitments and goals to reduce emissions of major greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide, methane, and hydrofluorocarbons. It covers major economic sectors, including power, transportation, and buildings, and is geared toward achieving goals the U.S. has pledged internationally: reducing economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020 and reducing economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions 26 to 28 percent from 2005 levels by 2025. These goals require reducing annual emissions by more than 600 million metric tons of carbon dioxide below 2014 levels by 2020 and by more than 1,300 million metric tons by 2025.

The most prominent objective within this pillar is reducing carbon pollution from power plants, which account for almost a third of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions,<sup>1</sup> making them the largest source category. At the time he announced the plan, the president ordered the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to propose regulations covering new power plants by September 2013 and existing power plants by June

2014. The agency met deadlines for releasing the proposals but missed deadlines for issuing final rules a year later, saying it will release final regulations for new, modified, and existing power plants in summer 2015. The proposed rule for new power plants would bar new coal-fired plants unless they employ carbon capture-and-storage technology. The proposed Clean Power Plan<sup>2</sup> for existing power plants is projected to reduce emissions 30 percent below 2005 levels by 2030 (a projected reduction of 383 million metric tons by 2020<sup>3</sup>). The proposal would establish different target emission rates (pounds of carbon dioxide per megawatt-hour of generation) for each state, and allows flexibility in designing their implementation plans. States will then have up to two years to submit their implementation plans to EPA or three, if they seek to participate in a multistate compliance program.

The administration already took significant steps in 2010 and 2012 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from cars and light-, medium-, and heavy-duty trucks by dramatically increasing their fuel economy standards. The next step outlined in the Climate Action Plan for the transportation sector, which accounted for 27 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in 2013,<sup>4</sup> is to strengthen fuel efficiency standards for medium- and heavy-duty trucks. The president instructed the Department of Transportation and EPA to propose post-2018 fuel efficiency standards for these vehicles by March 2015 and to finalize the rules by March 2016. However, the proposal has been delayed and not yet issued. The administration has also not made additional efforts toward some other transportation commitments in plan, such as increasing the role of alternative fuels in the U.S. marine vessel flag fleet.

Several steps have been taken to address two highly potent greenhouse gases, HFCs and methane. EPA issued final rules in December 2014 and April 2015 to expand the number of acceptable alternatives to HFCs under its Significant New Alternatives Policy and to delist specific uses of HFC-134a. The administration is also directing federal agency purchasing toward more climate-friendly alternatives to HFCs. The administration estimates that the HFC measures could reduce emissions by up to 135 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Following the release of a methane strategy in March 2014, the administration has proposed wide-ranging steps to reduce methane emissions from the oil and gas industry, agriculture, new and existing landfills, and coal mines. The administration estimates measures to reduce methane could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 90 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2020.<sup>6</sup> The oil and gas sector is the largest source of methane emissions, and the administration announced a goal to cut methane emissions from oil and gas wells by 40 to 45 percent from 2012 levels by 2025. To achieve this goal, the administration will propose emission standards for new and modified oil and gas wells in summer 2015 followed by a final rule in 2016, launch a voluntary industry partnership to reduce emissions from existing wells, set energy efficiency standards for certain equipment, propose funding leak identification and reduction technology research, and set standards to reduce venting and flaring on public lands. For the agriculture sector, the administration launched a voluntary partnership with the dairy industry in August 2014 to reduce emissions through the use of biodigesters. In June 2014, EPA proposed updates to

standards for new landfills and solicited feedback on whether to update guidelines for existing landfills. In April 2014, the Department of the Interior gathered input on reducing emissions from coal mines on public lands.

The administration's follow-up on other elements of this first pillar has been mixed. It has completed or made significant progress on many steps to strengthen energy efficiency standards, including finalizing a number of appliance standards that had been delayed during the president's first term. Also, the Department of Energy (DOE) released its first Quadrennial Energy Review on energy infrastructure in April 2015. But progress has been slower on steps to improve energy efficiency in federal facilities, including the synchronization of building codes.

### **Preparing the United States for the impacts of climate change**

The second pillar of the plan focuses on strengthening resilience to climate change impacts. The plan commits federal resources and assistance to help make communities, infrastructure, and ecosystems more climate-resilient while improving the scientific basis for future actions.

The administration has made some progress on most goals related to making communities and infrastructure more resilient. A November 2013 executive order<sup>7</sup> directed federal agencies to begin integrating climate resilience in a number of policy areas that, if carried through to completion, would fulfill many of the president's commitments. In October 2014, 38 federal agencies released final Climate Change Adaptation Plans,<sup>8</sup> which identify how climate change is expected to affect their missions and operations, outline steps to address these issues, and incorporate climate change considerations into decision-making.

The executive order also set up the State, Local, and Tribal Leaders Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience to bring together decision makers across the country to share experiences, challenges, and opportunities. In November 2014, the Task Force released its recommendations on how the federal government should modernize programs and policies to incorporate climate change, incentivize and remove barriers to community resilience, and provide useful, actionable information and tools.<sup>9</sup>

Some other discrete actions, especially those providing resources for climate resilience and those dealing with Hurricane Sandy, have been completed.

Other elements are designed to protect economic sectors and natural resources against the threats of climate change. The administration has begun examining needs in these areas: DOE released a major study on the vulnerability of critical energy and electricity infrastructure to climate change, and the Department of Commerce released a vulnerability assessment on oceans. Additional assessments, including on water resources, are forthcoming from other agencies. Though many resource-specific vulnerabilities highlighted in the plan have been addressed, including threats of reduced agricultural sustainability, drought, and wildfires, the administration has not begun work on commitments to reduce

vulnerabilities in the insurance sector.

The administration also committed to advance the science of climate measurement and adaptation and increase the availability, accessibility, and utility of climate-relevant scientific tools and information. In March 2014, the administration took steps to increase data availability through the release of the comprehensive National Climate Assessment and the Climate Data Initiative. The next significant step came in November 2014, when the administration released the [Climate Resilience Toolkit](#), which provides scientific tools, information, and links to experts that can help users manage their climate-related risks and opportunities, and improve their resilience to extreme events.

A January 2015 executive order<sup>10</sup> established a new federal flood risk management standard, requiring all future federal investments in and affecting floodplains to meet a defined level of resilience and consider current and future risks.

### **Leading international efforts to address global climate change**

The third pillar of the plan focuses on strengthening international leadership to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and build resilience to climate impacts. The plan commits the administration to work with other countries bilaterally, through international fora and international organizations, and multilaterally, through multilateral negotiations, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The administration has made climate change a top priority in its high-level diplomacy. In November 2014, the United States and China made a major joint announcement on their respective emissions reductions as well as joint research projects on clean energy, carbon capture, and other collaborative efforts. This was followed in January 2015 by a joint announcement with India on climate change and clean energy cooperation.

One of the president's major international accomplishments was a 2014 decision to limit U.S. public financing for new coal-fired power plants overseas through the Department of Treasury<sup>11</sup> and Export-Import Bank<sup>12</sup>. However, Congress is on course to reverse the decision. Despite potential backsliding in the United States itself, the president has encouraged other countries and international finance institutions, including the World Bank<sup>13</sup> to limit such financing, and some have.

Similarly, budgetary proposals related to international climate action have faced resistance from Congress. A call to eliminate U.S. fossil fuel subsidies as part of a global effort was met with little support from legislators. The administration has also not yet secured congressional support for further increases in support for climate mitigation and adaptation efforts in developing countries.

On the multilateral front, the administration is actively engaged in negotiations to achieve a new global climate agreement under the UNFCCC in late 2015. The United States was one of the first countries to put forward an "intended nationally determined contribution" to the agreement in April 2015.

The administration has actively pursued climate objectives in other multilateral fora. This year saw renewed commitments between the United States, China, and India to advance efforts under the Montreal Protocol to phase out HFCs. The administration also continues its multilateral efforts to reduce short-lived climate pollutants through the Climate and Clean Air Coalition, and it expanded the coalition to allow participation of private sector partners in July 2014. The administration also worked with partners to launch negotiations in July 2014 to reduce tariffs on environmental goods through the World Trade Organization. The United States-led Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate has developed a joint initiative to improve building sector energy efficiency. The United States and other parties to the International Civil Aviation Organization agreed in September 2013 to develop a market-based mechanism to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from aviation, and the United States has moved to adopt vessel efficiency standards agreed to through the International Maritime Organization.

## Conclusion

Two years after its launch, the administration has made increasingly significant progress toward achieving many of the goals of President Obama's Climate Action Plan, although the details of some of the more significant items have not yet been detailed or announced. The plan demonstrates a commitment toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions, one that is important to meet the U.S. goals of reducing emissions 17 percent by 2020 and 26 to 28 percent by 2025, especially in the absence of congressional action. Achieving the 2020 goal will be possible if the United States continues on the course of action established in the first two years of the plan. However, additional actions, whether through the plan or additional steps, must be taken to achieve the ambitious 2025 goal.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "U.S. Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report: 1990-2013," last accessed April 27, 2015, <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/usinventoryreport.html>, "Energy Uses," last accessed April 27, 2015, <http://www.c2es.org/energy/uses>.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, "Carbon Pollution Standards," last accessed June 19, 2014, <http://www.c2es.org/federal/executive/epa/carbon-pollution-standards-power-plants>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Clean Power Plan Proposed Rule," last modified June 19, 2014, <http://www2.epa.gov/carbon-pollution-standards/clean-power-plan-proposed-rule>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "U.S. Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report: 1990-2013," last accessed April 27, 2015, <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/usinventoryreport.html>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, *United States Climate Action Report 2014*, last accessed June 19, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/e/oes/rls/rpts/car6/index.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The White House, “Executive Order -- Preparing the United States for the Impacts of Climate Change,” last modified November 1, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/11/01/executive-order-preparing- united-states-impacts-climate-change>.

<sup>8</sup> Climate Change (Federal Actions) Supporting Information, <http://www.performance.gov/node/3406/view?view=public#supporting-info>.

<sup>9</sup> The White House, “State, Local, and Tribal Leaders Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience, Recommendations to the President,” [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/task\\_force\\_report\\_0.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/task_force_report_0.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> The White House, “Executive Order -- Establishing a Federal Flood Risk Management Standard and a Process for Further Soliciting and Considering Stakeholder Input,” last modified January 30, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/30/executive-order-establishing-federal-flood-risk-management-standard-and->

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, “U.S. Takes A Significant Step Toward A Clean Energy Future,” last modified October 29, 2013, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2195.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> Export-Import Bank of the United States, “Export-Import Bank Board Adopts Environmental Guidelines to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions,” last modified December 12, 2013, <http://www.exim.gov/newsandevents/releases/2013/EXPORT-IMPORT-BANK-BOARD-ADOPTS-REVISED-ENVIRONMENTAL-GUIDELINES-TO-REDUCE-GREENHOUSE-GAS-EMISSIONS.cfm>.

<sup>13</sup> “World Bank Group Sets Direction for Energy Sector Investments,” The World Bank, last modified July 16, 2013, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/07/16/world-bank-group-direction-for-energy-sector>.

The Center for Climate and Energy Solutions (C2ES) is an independent nonprofit organization working to promote practical, effective policies and actions to address the twin challenges of energy and climate change

2101 WILSON BLVD. SUITE 550 ARLINGTON, VA 22201 703-516-4146

**C2ES.ORG**

