

PRO/CON: Should Congress consider comprehensive climate change laws?

By McClatchy-Tribune News, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.23.14

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According to the U.S. Department of Energy, about 43 percent of Americans' carbon footprint comes from buildings. Solar-powered electricity is a great option for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, if homeowners can afford it. Photo: Don Kelsen/ Los Angeles Times/MCT

PRO: Now is the time to lead other countries

GREEN BAY, Wis. — In a report released this fall, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said that warming of the Earth's climate system is both unequivocal and unprecedented.

The IPCC is an organization of scientists set up by the United Nations. Its conclusion comes from multiple independent sources of data and information.

The authoritative IPCC study also found that it was "extremely likely" that human influence has been the major cause of [climate change \(https://www.newsela.com/?tag=global warming\)](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=global+warming). Our burning of fossil fuels — like coal, oil, and gas — is particularly to blame.

At the same time, international meetings — such as the Climate Change Conference just concluded in Warsaw, Poland — struggle to devise broadly acceptable agreements among countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, the emission of these gases pose grave risks to the world's economy, its environment and public health.

Legislation A Good Start

A major reason for the slow pace of global action is the United States. As the world's leading producer of greenhouse gases on a per-person basis, we simply haven't stepped up to a leadership position.

Nor, for that matter, has China, whose surging economy has pushed it to the No. 1 spot in total greenhouse gas emissions. China produces less greenhouse gases per person, but they have more than four times as many people as the U.S. does.

What might the United States do to demonstrate that it is prepared to play a leading role in slowing the rate of global climate change? And minimize its effects?

Passing a sweeping national climate change law would be a good start.

The United States has hardly been standing still on the issue. More than half of the states and more than a thousand U.S. cities have adopted a diversity of policies that could substantially reduce the release of greenhouse gas emissions. They include innovative actions on renewable fuels, such as those made from vegetables. These cities have also been promoting energy efficiency, public transportation, building efficiency and more.

Much has happened at the federal level too. The Obama administration has invested tens of billions of dollars in cutting-edge research on new renewable energy technologies, such as wind and solar power.

The administration also brokered historic agreements with the auto industry. Fuel economy standards are set to be raised for cars to 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025 and should translate to impressive environmental savings, as cars will burn less gas.

An Uphill Battle, But Try

Equally important, the White House and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are developing regulations for coal-fired power plants. These promise to begin shifting the nation away from the use of coal to other energy resources that give off far fewer greenhouse gases.

Yet the new regulations are not sufficient to tackle climate change, because there is no commitment by the U.S. as a whole. If there was, it might push reluctant nations around the world to do their own part. And some actions, notably the EPA power plant regulations, are certain to be challenged in court by the fossil fuel industry.

National climate change policy would send a strong signal to the world that the United States takes climate change seriously and it is prepared to step out in front on the issue.

How likely is it that a highly divided Congress can enact a climate change legislation? It is certainly not likely at present. And it won't happen as long as Republicans continue to deny the existence of climate change and defend the oil industry at all costs.

Nonetheless, it is essential that Congress at least try to design and approve a national climate change policy — and it should do so soon. It needs to draft a law, hold hearings, hear experts and other witnesses, review the evidence, and debate the issue at whatever length is necessary to build support.

Congress should explore all the policy tools it has available to find ways to appeal to Republicans, including incentives that get businesses and corporations involved. Clearly, this will be an uphill battle, but it is necessary to try.

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CON: Congress should leave well enough alone

XIAN, China — Congress should not waste time debating wide-ranging climate change legislation in the coming year. First, the combination of the natural gas revolution created by fracking and the economic doldrums we are stuck in have already cut our emissions of greenhouse gases dramatically. And that's without Congress doing anything at all.

If they did jump in, they'd be as likely to screw that up as make things better.

In addition, we should wait because the current proposals on how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are all expensive. Lowering greenhouse gas emissions will be cheaper in the future as technologies improve.

Consider the change in cell phone technology and prices over the past 20 years. When the director of the movie "Wall Street" wanted to emphasize Gordon Gecko's power and wealth, he portrayed him holding a brick-size cellphone.

Today, even schoolchildren carry iPhones, which are far more powerful — and much cheaper. That same innovative process will make both emissions reduction technology and mitigation efforts cheaper and better in the future.

A Pointless Gesture

The United States alone can do next to nothing about greenhouse gas emissions, and we should not burden our economy to attempt to do so.

China and India are growing rapidly. The additional greenhouse gasses they produce will swamp any reductions possible in the U.S. today.

For example, Chinese car ownership today on a per-capita basis is not even equal to U.S. car ownership in 1920.

When — not if — Chinese consumers close that gap, they'll be driving more than 20 times the number of cars they are driving today. Chinese electricity consumption is similarly growing rapidly too, with new coal-fired power plants opening like clockwork.

It would be pointless for the U.S. to reduce emissions on its own. And it would handicap negotiators in any effort to reach an agreement with developing economies like China and India.

Those nations will certainly insist on reductions from the developed world as part of the price of any reductions in greenhouse gas emissions they agree to.

We shouldn't cut our own emissions before an agreement is reached. If we do, we will have to make even more painful cuts to persuade developing countries to sign on.

Careful Consideration, Extended Debate

Finally, this particular Congress is going to be unable to reach agreement on any major legislation before the 2014 elections.

The leaders of the House and Senate are barely on speaking terms with each other. There's plenty of blame to go around, of course, and neither party is innocent.

A serious approach to climate change is going to require legislation touching on many aspects of Americans' daily lives. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions is ultimately going to require substantial changes in our energy consumption.

Since energy touches every aspect of our lives, this is a subject that requires careful consideration and extended debate. We need candidates putting forward specific proposals and debating their merits on the campaign trail. Then voters can make an informed choice about the type of approach they want to see. That hasn't happened yet and debating something this important requires more deliberation than we've had so far.

Moreover, as the members of Congress gear up for the 2014 election cycle, their attention will be on fundraising.

Starting a new debate on such a significant issue at this point in the election cycle is a recipe for really bad legislation. Writing a major bill will touch on virtually every area of the U.S. economy. To suggest writing a major bill in an election year will be inviting every special interest in the country to a party where the taxpayers get to play the role of the pinata.

Deliberation, not speed, is what we need.

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Quiz

- 1 Why does the PRO author introduce his argument with the IPCC's report?
 - (A) to shock his readers
 - (B) to appear authoritative
 - (C) to frighten his readers
 - (D) to directly address his opponent

- 2 Why does the CON author conclude his argument with, "Deliberation, not speed, is what we need"?
 - (A) to add some humor at the end to amuse readers
 - (B) to further mock Democrats who want to slow climate change
 - (C) to simplify his argument and make it stick in the minds of readers
 - (D) to make his argument sound childish, like the members of Congress

- 3 Which argument from the PRO article has the LEAST sufficient reasoning?
 - (A) that China's greenhouse gas production is on the rise
 - (B) that climate change is occurring because of human actions
 - (C) that the U.S. taking action on climate change would cause other countries to follow suit
 - (D) that the Obama administration has made efforts to improve America's environmental policies

- 4 What argument from the CON article has the LEAST sufficient reasoning?
 - (A) that China's fuel and electricity consumption will increase
 - (B) that cellphones have become increasingly cheaper and more powerful
 - (C) that the election could have an effect on whether a good piece of legislation could pass
 - (D) that because cellphones become cheaper, environmental technology will become cheaper, too

Answer Key

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