Introduction

In June 2013, President Barak Obama issued his Climate Action Plan (“The Plan”), because “climate change is no longer a distant threat.” Citing already observed rises in sea level, increased costs of weather disasters, worsening droughts, and record breaking changes in global high temperature averages, the President stated that our country has a moral obligation to future generations to address climate change through mitigation and adaptation measures.

The Plan sets broad federal climate action strategies, organized around three key principles: (1) reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, (2) adapting the U.S. to the impacts of climate change, and (3) leading global efforts aimed at stabilizing the Earth’s climate. The first two goals are largely in line with state and local governments’ efforts to adopt climate action plans or renewable energy portfolios. To ensure collaboration across different levels of government, President Obama established the State, Local, and Tribal Leaders Task Force to coordinate federal efforts with those already underway in local communities.
Reducing U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions

a. Reducing emissions from power plants

Power plants account for roughly one-third of all GHG emissions in the United States. To curb emissions from new and existing power plants, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposed emission standards for new power plants in April 2012. After receiving over 2.5 million public comments, the EPA revised its proposed emission standards and re-proposed rules from new plants on September 20, 2013. The proposed standards are not expected to dramatically reduce U.S. GHG emissions because they only apply to new power plants. Under Section 111(d) of the Clean Air Act (1970) however, the EPA has authority to similarly regulate existing sources after regulations for new sources are finalized. Regulation of existing sources is expected to significantly reduce U.S. GHG emissions. The EPA is expected to issue its proposed standards for existing sources in June 2014.

b. Deploying Renewable Energy

The Plan sets a goal to double renewable electricity generation capacity in the U.S by 2020. To accomplish this goal, the President has directed agencies such as the Department of Interior to streamline “clean energy” permitting. The Department of Interior is directed to permit an additional 10 gigawatts of renewable energy facilities, including utility scale solar facilities, wind farms, and geothermal plants by 2020. Further, the Plan seeks to support renewable energy by expanding and modernizing the electric grid to meet the needs of renewable facilities. The Plan also seeks to encourage investment in clean energy technologies, like advanced biofuels, cleaner coal, and emerging nuclear technologies – including small modular reactors – by allocating up to $8 billion in federal money for clean energy loans to be dispersed by the Department of Energy.

Finally, the Plan strives to further reduce U.S. GHG emissions by developing and implementing energy efficiency measures in homes, businesses, factories, and transportation. This includes setting post-2018 fuel economy standards for vehicles, establishing new energy efficiency standards for appliances (dishwashers, refrigerators,
Preventing the U.S. for the Impacts of Climate Change

In 2009, shortly after coming into office, President Obama established the Interagency Climate Change Adaptation Task Force. More than 20 Federal agencies served on the Task Force which was co-chaired by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The Task Force was established to analyze and recommend federal policies and practices aimed at adapting the U.S. to climate change. In February of 2013, based on the Task Force’s recommendations, Federal agencies began releasing Climate Change Adaptation Plans “outlining strategies to reduce the vulnerability of Federal programs, assets, and investments to the impacts of climate change, such as sea level rise or more frequent severe extreme weather.” With a wide range of agencies involved, the Climate Adaptation Plans address everything from protecting natural resources to responding to emergencies. On November 1, 2013, the President signed another Executive Order disbanding the Task Force and guiding Federal agencies to continue to follow the Task Force’s Recommendations.

To ensure collaboration with State, Local, and Tribal government efforts to adapt to climate change, the Climate Action Plan established the State, Local, and Tribal Leaders Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience. The State Local and Tribal Leaders Task Force is a short-term task force established to ensure Federal agency actions are in-line with and supplemental to State, Local, and Tribal activities. The Task Force is mandated to report its findings to relevant stakeholders by early November 2014.

Leading International Efforts to Address Global Climate Change

The final prong of the Plan focuses on engaging the international community, through bilateral and multilateral channels, to reduce future GHG emissions, promote sustainable and efficient technologies, enhance carbon sinks through reforestation, and mobilize international climate finance. The President’s international efforts are particularly focused on major emerging and GHG emitting economies, such as China, India, and Brazil. In 2009, the President launched the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate, which brings together 17 countries that account for roughly 75 percent of global GHG emissions. The Climate Action Plan represents the next step in promoting action among the Major Economies Forum members and disseminating the work of the Forum into ongoing international negotiations held under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and other multilateral and bilateral channels.

Learn more


For an in-depth analysis of the EPA’s proposed greenhouse gas emission standards for new power plants, see this report from the Congressional Research Service: http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43127.pdf

More information on Carbon Capture and Sequestration can be found here: http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/ccs/