

Five things Biden should do to tackle the climate emergency

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Having acknowledged the existence of a climate emergency, President Biden faces growing pressure from congressional Democrats to actually declare one.

First came Sens. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) and Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), who called on Biden to declare a climate emergency in recent weeks. Now Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) and Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) have turned their 2019 resolution declaring climate change a national emergency into a bill requiring Biden to declare a climate emergency under the National Emergencies Act.

As architects of the 2019 congressional climate emergency resolution who have spent the past four years building a movement to pressure governments to declare a climate emergency, we are encouraged by these developments. If Congress passes the Climate Emergency Act or Biden acts on his own, the United States will join 1,874 governments around the world that have declared a climate emergency. These declarations have sent a strong signal, transforming how we think and talk about climate change. Today, 65 percent of Americans and 64 percent of people globally agree that we face a climate emergency.

But emergency rhetoric does not equal emergency action. The truth is, none of these declarations has been followed by a policy response at the scope, speed and scale required to rescue our civilization from climate collapse.

If Biden is going to protect the United States, humanity, and the living world, he must not only declare a climate emergency but lead a full-blown emergency response to climate breakdown. Biden is off to an excellent start with his recent executive action on climate and environmental justice. But to actually move America into the emergency mode of action, he will need to go further.

Luckily, he has a model for mobilizing a unified national response: His own COVID-19 strategy.

First, develop a national strategy for victory. Biden's COVID-19 plan presents a comprehensive national strategy for ending the pandemic. While many have despaired of defeating climate change, the truth is we can do it. It certainly won't be easy, but broadly speaking, we know what we need to do: Restore the climate conditions that supported the rise of human civilization. That means returning greenhouse gas concentrations and global temperatures to pre-industrial levels as quickly as possible.

Second, strengthen supply chains using existing legal authorities. In his Sustainable Public Health Supply Chain executive order, Biden directed agencies to use all available authorities, including the Defense Production Act, to fill shortfalls in vaccine, masks and personal protection equipment. Biden should also invoke the Defense Production Act to build domestic supply chains for wind turbines, solar panels, batteries, electric vehicles, heat pumps and the whole array of technologies required to decarbonize the economy — a key goal outlined in the clean energy component of his Build Back Better plan.

Third, lead with emergency communications. To overcome potential congressional obstruction and unify the nation on climate, Biden will need to make use of the bully pulpit. A key goal of the administration's COVID-19 strategy is restoring trust with the American people by "acting as a source of truth," holding frequent briefings with scientific experts, and launching world-class public education campaigns on topics including masking, testing and vaccine hesitancy. On climate, the Biden team should provide weekly briefings with climate scientists and environmental justice experts highlighting rising death counts and economic damage caused by climate disasters, air pollution, toxic waste and accidents involving fossil fuel and petrochemical

infrastructure, as well as status updates on the administration's climate equity, green jobs and clean manufacturing goals. Targeted, multi-platform climate education campaigns could explain the emergency to the public, what the government is doing, and how individuals can get involved.

Fourth, stop making the problem worse. As the vaccine campaign ramps up, Biden's COVID-19 plan aims to mitigate the further spread of the virus through masking, testing and social distancing. To stop making the climate emergency worse, we need to stop emitting greenhouse gases as fast as possible. To that end, Biden should establish national pollution caps for all greenhouse gases (at or near pre-industrial concentrations) under the National Ambient Air Quality Standards program established by the Clean Air Act. This sweeping intervention would require states to produce plans to comprehensively regulate greenhouse gas emissions from virtually every sector of the economy. The Center for Biological Diversity has published a draft "Executive Order to Avert the Climate Emergency" that Biden could use to set these changes in motion.

Fifth, launch programs to end the emergency now. The goal of the vaccine campaign, begun two months after President Trump's COVID-19 emergency declaration with Operation Warp Speed, is to achieve herd immunity and end the pandemic as soon as possible. In a letter to The Guardian in November, leading climate scientists James Hansen and Michael Mann wrote that achieving net-zero emissions will not end the climate nightmare. In addition to rapidly eliminating emissions, they wrote, we must remove as much of the historic greenhouse gas burden emitted into the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution as we can. We need to treat this excess carbon as waste and fund massive efforts to return it to restored ecosystems and soils, and safely and permanently bury it.

The public and the Democratic Party are starting to wake up to the climate emergency. However, we still aren't treating it with anything like the urgency of COVID-19, even though climate change is an order of magnitude more threatening than a pandemic. Biden's COVID-19 strategy shows he understands how to approach an emergency: Plan for victory, aggressively tackle supply shortages, spend what's required, and communicate frequently and honestly. If he can apply this approach to the climate emergency, we may have a fighting chance of surviving the 21st century.

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