

Climate Change : Country Profile

1. Climate Profile United States - Introduction

The United States is the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases and is still strictly opposed to mandatory emissions reductions. Still, the country boasts some of the most active scientists, organizations and politicians committed to fighting global warming. Read our climate profile for a balanced view.



Picture Gallery (click on the picture to start)

A protester holds up a sign during a demonstration in front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington in April 2007. The Step It Up campaign urges U.S. Congress to cut carbon emissions by 80 percent by 2050. (Photo: Reuters)

The United States produces around a quarter of the world's carbon dioxide emissions while representing less than five percent of the world's population. While these figures are clearly disproportionate, U.S. leaders argue that the Gross National Product (GNP) of the country also represents 25 percent of global GNP. Until China eclipses it sometime in the next few years, the United States remains the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHG).

Energy Consumption

The United States has long been a very large consumer of energy. Government figures show that in 2004 the average U.S. American was responsible for 20.1 tons of carbon dioxide emissions per year, compared to 19.3 tons in Australia, 10.4 tons in Germany and 3.6 tons in China.

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Its heavy carbon footprint is due to its sheer size and economic success. Over the last 25 years, the United States has enjoyed the largest annual economic and population growth rate of any mature industrial economy in the world.

U.S. Americans use a lot of energy to run their many electronic appliances, and heat or cool buildings, particularly during the very hot summers and cold winters that affect much of the continent. Americans also drive a lot, owing to their country's size and relatively cheap gasoline. Retail prices are less than half the level in Germany or the United Kingdom. Most American families have at least two vehicles.

In search for good schools and save environments, many Americans

have moved away from the central cities pushing the boundaries of suburbia. With little or no investment in public transportation, gas usage rose and travel distances increased during the late 20th century.

Climate Politics

The world's biggest economy has been reluctant to take steps to reduce its heavy carbon footprint. Of 53 countries surveyed by Germanwatch in 2006, only two countries scored worse than the United States in terms of emissions trends and climate policy. While most other industrialized nations have agreed to the reductions in CO2 emissions mandated by the Kyoto Protocol, the U.S. has not.

Because of strong opposition from both the Democratic and Republican parties, the treaty was never ratified by the U. S. Senate. President George W. Bush and other U.S. politicians continue to refuse mandatory emissions caps, saying it would retard economic growth and lead to higher unemployment levels.

Instead of the Kyoto Protocol, political leaders in Washington have tended to prefer non-binding, voluntary measures aimed at improving efficiency and promoting technological solutions – a policy that environmentalists say has so far been ineffective, because the country's emissions continue to increase.

But the tune in Washington may be changing, if only gradually. Public awareness about the risks of global warming is growing, and local policy initiatives to reduce emissions have proven politically popular in states like California.

Presidential Campaign

Even President Bush, who has been resistant to proposals to reduce carbon emissions, has launched climate change initiatives. Climate change is certain to be a campaign issue for the 2008 presidential election for candidates from both major political parties. Some therefore believe that it is just a matter of time before the federal government makes some kind of binding commitment to curbing national GHG emissions.

Anticipating future policies and increasing consumer demand for energy efficient products, U.S. companies may actually be ahead of their government. They are already investing billions of dollars to develop new products and services. With oil prices reaching record-highs, foreign and domestic auto manufacturers are seeing increasing demand for more fuel-efficient cars in the U.S. market. As in China and Europe, the renewable energy and biofuels sectors in the United States are growing rapidly. According to the Worldwatch Institute, around 10,000 U.S. businesses and 110,000 households are now using certified "green" electricity generated from renewable resources.

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