

Climate Change : Country Profile

4. Climate Profile United States - Strategy

U.S. President George W. Bush is a critic of the Kyoto Protocol. He favors voluntary restrictions and the use of new technologies. On the state level, however, governments have enacted some of the most cutting-edge climate policy. Will this trend also translate in stricter policymaking on the federal level?



Climate Meter

U.S. climate policies at a glance and their assessment (Graphic: WWF/Allianz Climate Scorecard)

National Policies

The U.S. government has yet to formulate a comprehensive federal climate policy. Some politicians in Washington explain their unwillingness to act by citing a lack of scientific consensus about whether or not humans are to blame for climate change. Others seem reluctant to initiate policy that would mean enormous changes and costs for many U.S. businesses and industries, and that might result in the loss of jobs.

So far, President Bush and Congress have preferred voluntary, non-binding measures aimed at improving energy efficiency, promoting technological development, and reducing gasoline consumption. This reflects a common American approach of using market forces to address social problems. The Pew Center on Global Climate Change, however, finds that without mandatory carbon constraints, U.S. emissions will rise by 15 to 50 percent from year 2000 levels to 2035.

President Bush answered criticism of his climate policy by mentioning global warming in his January 2007 State of Union address. Environmental groups like the Pew Center said his proposed measures would not be sufficient to reduce national carbon emissions levels. Democrats as well as Republicans are now calling for a clear and proactive federal policy to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Three trends are pressuring this gradual shift in U.S. climate politics.

The Role of Businesses

Large American businesses have begun to recognize the problem. In February 2007, 85 businesses and organizations gathered at the Global Roundtable on Climate Change, a framework for clean energy and climate change action organized by the Earth Institute at Columbia University. Among the participating companies urging President Bush to support mandatory reductions in GHG emissions were General Electric, Google, Duke Energy, Allianz, Ford and Wal-Mart. Companies said they want clarity from Washington so that they can better figure climate

change into their long-term strategies.

Public Opinion

The second trend pushing for federal action on climate change is public opinion. Hurricane Katrina, heat waves in 2006, and Al Gore's Oscar winning documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, have all spiked public interest and awareness about the dangers of global warming. Recent polls are reflecting this increasing concern. According to a 2007 survey from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, roughly 80 percent of surveyed Americans think global warming should be addressed.

Local Action

Public concern about climate change has fuelled a third potentially influential trend – local and state political action. Republican governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger won a reelection bid in 2006 largely due to popular plans to cut state emissions, promote energy efficiency, and by leading the first state initiative to regulate CO₂ emissions from vehicles.

Meanwhile, over 450 mayors of cities across the country – including Seattle, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington DC – have signed the US Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, essentially committing their cities to meeting or beating targets proposed for – but never accepted by – the United States in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol: a 7-percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2012.

Court Rulings

Among the other signs of a policy shift, a landmark April 2007 ruling by the Supreme Court stands out. The court voted in favor of twelve states that accused the U.S. EPA of not effectively regulating emissions.

Meanwhile the newly elected Congress discussed a range of proposals about national GHG emission reductions in early 2007. Observers see much of the climate legislation being proposed and debated on Capital Hill as positioning for the 2008 presidential election, where climate change is expected to be an important campaign issue.

International Policies

As the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, U.S. participation is critical to the success of any global effort to slow climate change.

International criticism focuses on U.S. unwillingness to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Although the U.S. was involved in negotiations leading up to the protocol, the U.S. Senate in 1997 rejected any binding emission reduction targets for industrialized countries if none were set for developing countries like China and India. Politicians said such a treaty would put the U.S. economy at a competitive disadvantage. As a result, neither President Bush nor Bill Clinton submitted the Kyoto Protocol to the Senate for ratification.

Instead, the United States has entered into a number of informal international frameworks for addressing climate change, most notably the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate (AP6) with China, Japan, India, Australia and South Korea. As with the recent U.S.-EU "High-Level Dialogue on Climate Change, Clean Energy and Sustainable Development," AP6 emphasizes voluntary initiatives, such as technology exchange and investment in developing renewable sources of energy.

So far, U.S. officials have made no indication that the country will ratify the Kyoto Protocol, though U.S. delegates continue to participate in UN-

facilitated negotiations for a post-Kyoto framework for international cooperation. A U.S. effort to reduce domestic carbon emissions, however, could well result in U.S. leadership on the international stage.

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