

How Obama can follow Paris climate deal: Column

Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang 7:41 p.m. EST December 21, 2015

Use executive authority to double down on carbon emissions in the U.S.



(Photo: Francois Guillot, AFP/Getty Images)

President Obama's crackdown on greenhouse gas emissions from cars and power plants made the U.S. a leader at the United Nations climate summit. Now, with the whole world watching, he can give real meaning to the promise Paris offers without bumping into an intractable Congress.

The president can accelerate and expand efforts to slash emissions of global warming pollutants in the natural gas and oil industries' drilling and distribution systems and improve refinery efficiency. He can issue tougher efficiency standards for energy-wasting home furnaces. And the government must begin to tackle industries such as cement manufacturing, which gets little public attention but spews vast tons (<http://www3.epa.gov/ttnchie1/conference/ei13/ghg/hanle.pdf>) of carbon dioxide, the gas primarily responsible for climate change.

Such strong measures would have a multiplier effect: Not only would the U.S. cut global warming pollutants, its leadership would also reach beyond the Paris talks and pressure others to act, just as it has helped prompt China to commit (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/11/fact-sheet-us-china-joint-announcement-climate-change-and-clean-energy-c>) to its own sizable emissions reductions.

Methane is the most plentiful greenhouse gas (http://cdiac.ornl.gov/pns/current_ghg.html) in the atmosphere, after carbon dioxide. It is emitted in far smaller amounts and disappears sooner, but molecule for molecule it traps more than 25 times (<http://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/gases/ch4.html>) as much heat as CO2 over a 100 years. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that nearly 30% of U.S. methane emissions come from oil production and the production, transmission and distribution of natural gas. The agency is preparing standards (<http://www3.epa.gov/airquality/oilandgas/actions.html>) that would limit methane leaks from new drilling sites and pipelines. These would save the equivalent of 7.7 million to 9 million metric tons (http://www3.epa.gov/airquality/oilandgas/pdfs/og_prop_ria_081815.pdf) of carbon dioxide a year in 2025.

But what about currently operating sites? They are likely responsible for roughly 90% of the oil and gas industries' methane emissions. The administration must set standards that would require industry to plug these leaks, cutting waste in half and keeping the equivalent of 75 million metric tons of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere each year. "President Obama has ample time left to issue rules cutting methane emissions from existing facilities," says Tim Ballo, staff attorney at Earthjustice (<http://earthjustice.org/about/staff/timothy-ballo#>), an environmental advocacy group.



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(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/12/02/fracking-ends-climate-change-wars-clean-energy-solutions-column/76663456/>)

The president used authority granted by Congress in the Clean Air Act to tackle pollution from cars (<http://www3.epa.gov/otaq/standards.htm>) and power plants (<http://www.epa.gov/cleanpowerplan/clean-power-plan-existing-power-plants>). Using that same authority, the administration can crack down on oil refinery emissions — one of the largest (<http://www3.epa.gov/nsr/ghgdocs/refineries.pdf>) industrial sources (<http://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/sources/industry.html>) of greenhouse gases after power plants (<http://earthjustice.org/news/press/2007/oil-refineries-targeted-for-global-warming-emissions-cuts#>).

Much electricity is wasted on inefficient appliances. Some consumers know to shop for those with an "energy star (<https://www.energystar.gov/>)" efficiency rating. The government sets standards to prod manufacturers into making improvements — for those shopping for homes they own and for renters whose appliances are supplied by landlords.

Efficiency standards for dozens of appliances have been the subject of negotiations with foot-dragging industry for decades. For example, according to Marianne DiMascio of the Appliance Standards Awareness Project (<http://www.appliance-standards.org/content/staff>), litigation and other resistance have stalled the adoption of meaningful new energy-saving rules for gas-fired home furnaces since 1987 (https://www1.eere.energy.gov/buildings/appliance_standards/product.aspx/productid/72).

This year, the Energy Department proposed requiring (http://consumerfed.org/press_release/us-consumers-could-save-16-billion-with-proposed-residential-gas-furnace-standards/) new units to convert 92% of their fuel's energy into heat, a significant improvement from the current 80% rate. While it would keep the equivalent of 137 million metric tons of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere over 30 years, a 95% standard would save 200 million metric tons, DiMascio says.

The failure to make any real improvements for more than 20 years cost consumers nearly \$13 billion, according to the Consumer Federation of America (http://consumerfed.org/press_release/us-consumers-could-save-16-billion-with-proposed-residential-gas-furnace-standards/).

Enough with industry foot-dragging.



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Among the sectors that draw little attention is the cement industry, one of the largest polluters. Manufacturing cement involves burning fossil fuels to heat raw materials to up to [2,700 degrees](http://www3.epa.gov/ttnchie1/conference/ei13/ghg/hanle.pdf) (<http://www3.epa.gov/ttnchie1/conference/ei13/ghg/hanle.pdf>) Fahrenheit, giving off roughly [a ton of carbon dioxide for every ton](http://www.buildinggreen.com/features/flyash/appendixa.cfm) (<http://www.buildinggreen.com/features/flyash/appendixa.cfm>) of cement emerging from the kiln. We must place priority on putting energy efficiency and other solutions to work to cut these emissions and those from such other energy-intensive industries as metals production.

To be sure, these measures lack the poetic appeal of solar panels and wind turbines that cleanly yield electricity from endlessly renewable resources — themselves growing elements in the fight against global warming. But using energy more efficiently is the key workhorse as we wring greenhouse gases from the economy.

After 2016, the next president will need to defend, and follow through on, the two major steps Obama has set in motion: the tough fuel efficiency standard that will [cut automotive carbon pollution 40%](http://www.c2es.org/federal/executive/vehicle-standards) (<http://www.c2es.org/federal/executive/vehicle-standards>) while delivering a new car fleet that averages 54.5 miles per gallon in 2025, and a [32% cut](http://www.epa.gov/cleanpowerplan/fact-sheet-clean-power-plan-numbers) (<http://www.epa.gov/cleanpowerplan/fact-sheet-clean-power-plan-numbers>) in power plant emissions. Automakers are [already trying](http://www.wsj.com/articles/auto-makers-regulators-on-fuel-economy-collision-course-1421174452) (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/auto-makers-regulators-on-fuel-economy-collision-course-1421174452>) to weaken the new-car standards, and [coal and utility forces](http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/257856-24-states-coal-company-sue-obama-over-climate-rule) (<http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/257856-24-states-coal-company-sue-obama-over-climate-rule>) have threatened to drown the Clean Power Plan in a flood of litigation.

The refusal of so many Republican presidential candidates and members of Congress to even recognize the problems posed by global warming only underscores the need for Obama to do as much as possible in 2016.

To turn the tide against the changing climate, he must act boldly and leverage our leadership as though the world depends on it. Because it does.

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