

# Will the new Congress bring action on climate change?

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEREMY SYMONS

Climate lies at the center of much of EDF's work. In the 1980s, when global warming wasn't on most people's radar screens, we had a full-time climate scientist on staff. And since then, we've devoted more resources and energy to this issue than any other. That's because we recognize how important a stable climate is not just to the Earth's environment, but to the survival of humanity itself.

For this special report, we sat down with Jeremy Symons, our senior director for climate policy. Jeremy has more than 20 years of experience on the climate issue, having spent an earlier part of his career at EPA developing policies to address climate change. From his present perch in our Washington office, Jeremy keeps close tabs on Congress and religiously follows the politics of climate change. He educates members and their staff on climate change and clean energy, and *The Hill* newspaper has recognized him as one of the nation's top nonprofit advocates.



**Jeremy Symons**

In this report, Jeremy offers insights into the implications of the midterm elections, avenues for progress in the remainder of President Obama's term, and why so many in Congress still deny global warming.

Although he's a consummate Washington insider on climate policy, Jeremy lives in distant Fredericksburg, VA, "far enough outside the beltway to keep things real," he says.

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## **Why is action on climate so urgent?**

Climate change has gone from scientific forecast to today's reality. Storms, droughts and floods are having a tremendous impact on families and communities today. That's one notable reason for urgency. Here's another: globally, emissions are going up when they should be going down. That points to an urgent need to put emissions on a downward trajectory. We need to take responsibility for the legacy we're leaving communities and families today, and for our kids and grandkids tomorrow.

But there's reason to be optimistic: we have the tools and technology to tackle the climate problem. We now have sources of energy that don't pollute, that don't cost more and that don't run out. But if we don't accelerate the transition to clean energy, it will be difficult to win the fight against climate change.

## **How big a deal is the recent U.S.-China agreement on climate?**

It's hard to overstate the importance of the agreement. We've travelled a long road looking for global cooperation on climate change, and this announcement represents a whole new level of commitment. China and the U.S. are the two largest emitters of global warming pollution, and President Obama and President Xi Jinping set specific targets for curbing emissions.

The announcement was a game changer on two fronts. First, it was a diplomatic breakthrough, and leadership from China and the U.S. should spur even more global cooperation, particularly looking ahead to global talks in Paris in 2015.

Second, these are two of the biggest markets—and manufacturers—for clean energy technologies that can create jobs while cutting the pollution. Solar, wind and other clean technologies will become even more affordable and accessible as production increases. Think about it—building the first smartphone probably cost a fortune, but today they are in widespread use. The U.S.-China deal is a signal to the private sector and innovators that the world wants clean energy, and there's a big market for it.

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I am heartened by this, because many people are cynical about the prospects for international progress—just as they've become cynical that Congress will ever act. But there's a lot of hope here. We need to weather many disappointments to arrive at breakthroughs like this.

### **What is the outlook for the new Congress?**

All the on-the-ground evidence and polling shows strong public support for federal action on climate change. Environmental issues weren't at the forefront of this election, but the new Congress will undoubtedly attack environmental laws and regulations. The lobbyists for the biggest polluters are already working overtime to derail the president's actions on climate. Some Congressional leaders will use any legislation that is moving forward, including bills to fund the government, to undermine EPA's progress. I hope the new Congress doesn't overreach, but we've beaten the lobbyists before, and we'll do it again. The public is on our side. We're relying on the many champions of climate action in Congress and people outside the Beltway who will speak out.





Over the next few years, we want to change the dynamic in Congress. We believe we can close the gap between where Congress is and where the public is, and that means bringing bipartisan voices into the discussion. It means not giving up on Congress. And there are signs of change—even Congress isn't immune to reality. Members are opening their eyes as they hear from people they respect and see the impacts of climate change for themselves.

EPA is taking critical first steps, but we ultimately need Congress to put federal limits on all major industrial sources of carbon pollution. Those limits will drive innovation and get us to clean energy in the most efficient way possible. And we can do that in a way that grows the economy. Congress will get there eventually. It's our job to make sure it happens sooner rather than later.

### **Do the climate deniers in Congress know better, or do they truly believe that climate change isn't happening?**

Climate denial was a temporary refuge for some members of Congress who don't want to acknowledge that pollution from fossil fuels is a real problem. But increasingly, they are finding out that climate denial is not a good place to be politically. Not only is it bad science, it's bad politics. You're starting to hear more members of Congress say things like, "Well, I'm not a scientist, so I can't speak to it." That's still a dodge. You don't need to be scientist to hear what the scientists are saying.

We need our elected officials to stop playing politics on this. It's fine to offer different solutions, but pretending there isn't a problem is absurd. The politicians who are hiding from the issue are on the wrong side of history, and all the momentum is on the side of action. I believe that climate leadership will be a winning issue in the 2016 elections across the political spectrum. The biggest problem for climate deniers is young voters. For them, the science is settled, and their future is at risk. Over the coming years, politicians will ignore them at their peril.



## **What can President Obama do in the remainder of his term?**

President Obama announced in June an important plan to cut carbon pollution from power plants. That's going to help drive the transformation to cleaner energy, which will be better for public health, the planet *and* the economy. The president can also control methane pollution from the oil and gas sector, and from the vast number of leaks in the natural gas system. Methane is a potent, heat-trapping gas. It's more than 80 times more damaging to the climate than CO<sub>2</sub> in the near term. So efforts to cut methane can have a significant impact. The president has spoken to the importance of cutting methane pollution, but the proof will be whether EPA takes the strong steps necessary.

The president has also taken action to improve fuel economy for cars. Next up is cutting tailpipe pollution from heavy trucks. That will have enormous benefits on climate and on fuel costs.

## **What about the international front?**

The U.S.-China agreement sets the stage for productive international negotiations in Paris in 2015. At the Copenhagen talks in 2009, countries pledged to reduce pollution by the year 2020. The president announced a target of reducing pollution in the U.S. 17% by 2020. This next round of talks in Paris is aimed at what happens after 2020—we have a longer-term goal of reducing pollution 83% by the year 2050, but we need a roadmap for how to get there. Under the U.S.-China agreement, President Obama committed to reduce emissions by 26–28% by the year 2025. China, whose emissions have been surging, agreed to curb its emissions and stop the rise altogether by 2030. We'd like to see both nations put even more aggressive commitments on the table in Paris.

Many people ask why the U.S. would move faster than China. My question is, why should the U.S. wait for any nation? We're the world's leader in so many areas, so why should climate be





different? History shows that when the U.S. leads, other nations follow. And if we lead the global clean energy revolution, we'll reap enormous economic benefits. We don't want to go it alone, but we can't afford to lag behind.

**The climate march in New York seems to be some sort of watershed. Would you agree with that?**

I was at the climate march. For someone who's worked on this issue as long as I have, particularly working in Washington, where things get quite discouraging at times, it was really energizing to see the passion and commitment of so many people. When 400,000 people take the time to make their voices heard on climate, it's incredibly heartening. I think the climate march was an expression of momentum that's building across the country. Young people in particular are upset by the lack of progress on this issue—not just because it's their future, but also because elected officials are so unresponsive. But the march showed that this is an issue of concern across generations.

**Given the gridlock in Washington, what kinds of things can states do to move this issue forward?**

States can lead the clean energy revolution by setting goals for both renewable energy and improving energy efficiency and knocking down the barriers that stand in the way of those goals. The technologies are there. What's missing in some states is a commitment to provide a level playing field so families and businesses have access to the technologies. One major exception is California, which passed an ambitious bill several years ago that is already curbing emissions in that state. California is demonstrating that we can cut emissions while we have a healthy and growing economy, and in fact, clean energy has been a huge shot in the arm to California's economy.

## **The private sector sometimes seems to be ahead of the government. Is there a momentum for climate action in the private sector?**

Because there's a strong movement among the public for climate action, many companies are more sensitive to consumers than even their elected officials. You see it a lot in their advertisements, where every company is trying to out-green the other. You also see it in the insurance industry, because insurers are becoming increasingly aware of their potential losses due to climate change. But what the private sector wants most is clarity on the rules of the road. More than anything, business dislikes uncertainty, and the uncertainty businesses face today will force them to increase pressure for action. That's another reason we need federal limits on climate pollution—they set the goal so business can innovate and get the job done.

## **Is there any particular aspect of climate change that keeps you awake at night?**

Absolutely. There are hundreds of millions of people in the world who depend on safe coastlines. It's a tragedy that the most vulnerable people in the world will pay for our shortsightedness. Conflicts will inevitably result as clean water becomes increasingly scarce, and storms increasingly will affect those who live in low-lying areas. We may not be able to wave a magic wand to undo what we've already done, but we must slow the pace of climate change and give these people a chance.

Another thing that keeps me up at night is the sheer unpredictability of the future. We're running this experiment on the entire planet. What we know is scary enough, but what we don't know is even scarier, as we start plucking at the threads of nature. The law of unintended consequences is definitely in effect, and uncertainty is not a comfort. The stakes are so high. At the climate march I saw a sign that stuck with me. It said "There is no Planet B." To me, that said everything. We have only one opportunity to get this right.



## What do you tell your own kids about this issue? What guidance can you give parents?

I think the most important thing is that we can do something about it. Listening to scientists might motivate some of us, but at the end of the day it's the prospect for making a difference that gives hope to our kids. Whether it's writing a letter, whether it's recycling to save energy, or talking to your friends and teachers at school, or doing a science project on climate—whatever it is, we all have things we can do. The only wrong answer is to do nothing.

## How do you feel about the progress we've made?

America has made real progress. I think back to when Dick Cheney in 2001 said we needed to build more than one coal-fired power plant every week for the next 20 years. And energy forecasts back then were projecting that emissions by 2030 would be 40% higher than they are now. And now, emissions are 10% lower and we have plans to reduce emissions lower still. That will require progress on many fronts, and we have to fight for every inch of that progress. The job isn't done—far from—and we're not going fast enough. But people said it couldn't be done at all. People said it would destroy the economy that the technology wasn't there. What we're finding is we're unlocking whole new ways, and less expensive ways, of getting renewable energy online while we improve energy efficiency. I'm encouraged by how far we've come. If we rest, that progress will be undone. But if we fight, and if we keep pushing, we can achieve anything.

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