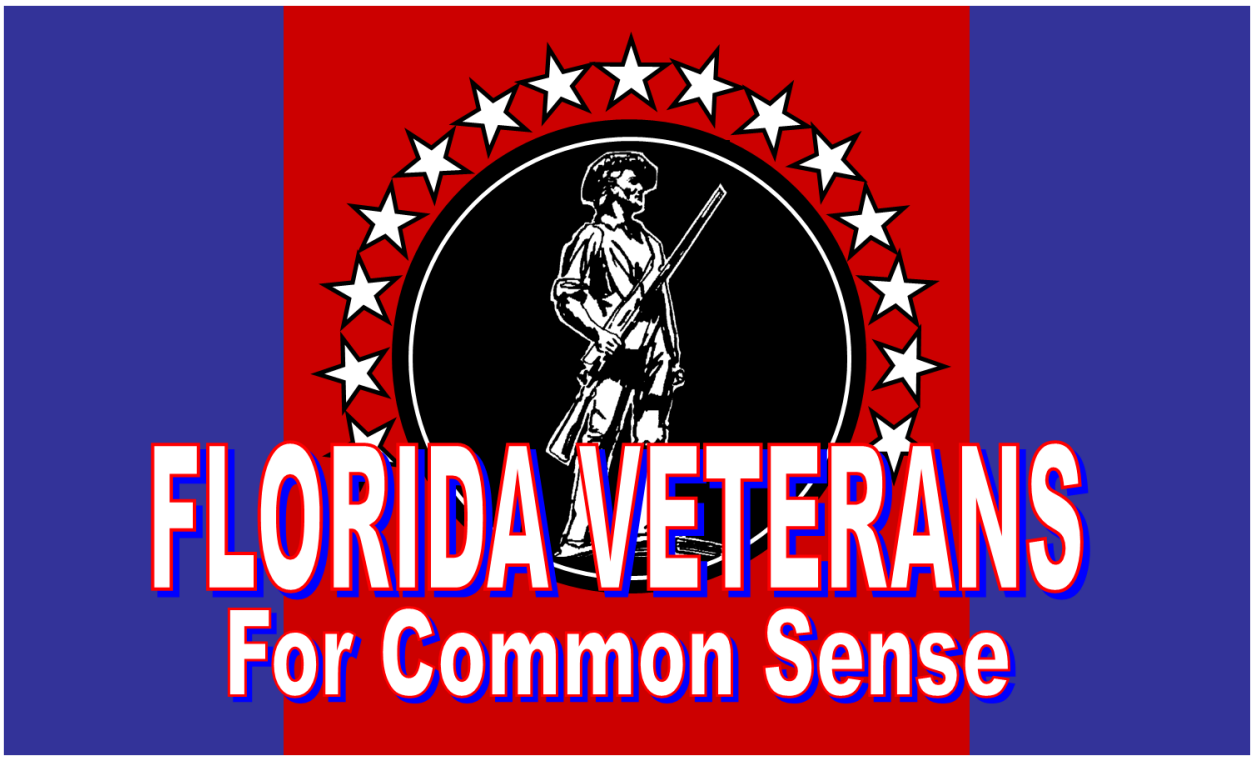
COP 26 Report #2



From the Environmental Working Group as of November 2, 2021

Global cooperation (to keep average temperature from exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels) is perhaps the most important ingredient in achieving a stable climate. So, the Environmental Working Group is closely watching the UN's Climate Summit (COP 26), which began this this weekend in Glasgow. This is the second in a series of reports on the climate conference in Glasgow. You can see the first report by clicking here.

As of this report, world leaders and delegates are gathering in Glasgow and making/listening to introductory remarks. "Bla Bla Bla" as Greta Thunberg says, dismissing world leaders' climate rhetoric. And she has cause for skepticism. Let's hope this summit does not disappoint us (again).

History. Justin Gillis, a fellow at Harvard's Center for the Environment reviewed the history of the other 25 times that delegates from around the world have met to discuss climate change:

> The first attempt to give the climate treaty some real teeth was called the Kyoto Protocol, which took effect in 2008. It was an effort to impose targets and timetables on the richer countries, most of which had high emissions. Developing countries were exempted, including China, even though its emissions had already begun to rise steeply. The United States, the world's largest emitter historically and the largest at the time of the protocol, refused to adopt it, partly for fear of disabling American industry in its competition with China. (As it turned out, the emissions cuts by countries that ratified Kyoto were eventually swamped by the increase in emissions in the developing world.)

> Negotiators tried again in 2009 in Copenhagen. But a new American administration, under Barack Obama, failed to pull the countries of the world into common cause.
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> That failure set the stage for a rebound. In 2010, negotiators abandoned the effort to impose targets and timetables on reluctant countries. Instead, they said: Come and tell us what you can do.
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> This seemingly weaker approach had a surprising result: It produced greater global ambition. With the pressure of mandatory targets lifted, nearly every country made commitments to tackle the problem. Far better prepared this time, the Obama administration negotiated directly with China, and both countries offered bold pledges to reduce emissions.
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> This approach culminated in late 2015 with the Paris Climate Agreement, gaveled into existence in a huge plywood conference hall outside Paris, where cheers rang out and Champagne flowed. Climate change was now seen as a problem every country had a responsibility to tackle.
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> Even so, the national pledges made at Paris were wholly inadequate. If met, they would still have allowed global warming to rise to dangerous levels. Recognizing this, the delegates in Paris adopted a "ratchet" mechanism, requiring countries to show up every five years and make new, bolder pledges. That was supposed to happen in 2020, but was delayed a year by the pandemic. So it is in Glasgow this year that the first new pledges come due. (*NY Times* Will Glasgow Be the Climate Advance We Need?)

The suspense is palpable. In two weeks will we have pledges that have a chance of achieving the stated goal of preventing global average temperature from exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels? Will actions exceed rhetoric?

We are reminded by Fiona Harvey that leading climate scientists have warned the 1.5C temperature limit is a vital physical threshold for the planet's climate, and not an arbitrary political construct that can be haggled over. This is a major stumbling block to watch during the negotiations. Many countries would prefer to use long term goals, such as "net zero by 2050" instead of targets that have a chance of achieving the 1.5C limit.

> Johan Rockström, the director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and one of the world's foremost climate scientists, warned that the 1.5C target was not like other political negotiations, which can be haggled over or compromised on.
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> "A rise of 1.5C is not an arbitrary number, it is not a political number. It is a planetary boundary," he told the Guardian in an interview. "Every fraction of a degree more is dangerous."
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> Allowing temperatures to rise by more than 1.5C would vastly increase the risk of irreversible changes to the climate, he said. For instance, it would raise the risk of the Arctic losing its summer ice, with dire knock-on effects on the rest of the climate as the loss of reflective ice increases the amount of heat the water absorbs, in a feedback loop that could rapidly raise temperatures further.
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> The Greenland ice sheet, the melting of which would raise sea level rises, could also be tipped into a state of irreversible decline beyond 1.5C.

> A rise of more than 1.5C would also threaten changes to the Gulf Stream, which could also become irreversible. It could result in catastrophe for biodiversity hotspots, damage agriculture across swathes of the globe, and could inundate small islands and low-lying coastal areas. "This is real science – it is a real number. Now we can say that with a high degree of confidence," he said, as 1.5C indicated a physical limit to the warming the planet can safely absorb.
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> Rockström added: "[Staying within] 1.5C is achievable. It is absolutely what we should be going for." *(Climate experts warn world leaders 1.5C is 'real science', not just talking point)*

As an example of using insufficient, long term goals, the leaders of the world's biggest economies (G20) met in Rome and agreed Sunday to seek carbon neutrality "by or around mid-century" as they wrapped up a summit before going to Glasgow (G-20 make pledges on climate neutrality).

As Johan Rockström said, acheivig 1.5C is achievable. But it takes bold action NOW! We must restore the earth's natural carbon cycle to reduce the amount of heat trapping gas in the atmosphere from over 400 ppm to below 350 ppm within a decade. The timing and scope is the key: we must reduce and then eliminate the emission of greenhouse gases 70-100% by 2030. Meanwhile, we must remove more than 140 gigatons of carbon from the atmosphere and store it in our soils and biomass. The means to achieve these goals are (a) Plant lots of trees and stop deforestation; (b) reduce energy consumption; (c) Electrify (almost) everything and generate our electrical power from *non-emitting power sources; and* (d) improve the food system (which is responsible for 20-30% of the problem. We need to see commitments to these sorts of means. (What do we need to do?)

Two weeks-time will tell. Suspense.

Emissions are not the only issue. Rich countries promised $100 billion a year in aid for poor countries to cope with the climate emergency, and they have failed to deliver the full sum. The United States is among the biggest deadbeats. Expect a lot of fireworks on this issue. It is one of several that could cause the conference to dissolve in recrimination and failure. (Justin Gillis).

Consider acting: One policy that would allow the US to achieve over 50% emissions reduction by 2030 is a price on carbon. We can help move US policy in the right direction by calling/writing your members of congress and urge them to include a price on carbon in the reconciliation package. Here's a link to the Citizens Climate Lobby action page to put you in touch with them. https://citizensclimatelobby.org/call-your-representative/#/54/

More next week on COP 26.

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Return to Homepage