

Gore Urges Congress to Confront Climate Emergency

By J.R. Pegg

WASHINGTON, DC, January 28, 2009 (ENS) - Former Vice President Al Gore today warned U.S. lawmakers that humanity faces "a planetary emergency" from climate change and repeated his call for binding limits on greenhouse gas emissions. "We have arrived at a moment of decision," said Gore, who shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for his work on climate change. "Our home - the Earth - is at danger."

Scientific evidence continues to mount that climate change is happening faster than many scientists first predicted and that some effects may be irreversible, Gore told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

If global emissions of greenhouse gases continue to rise at current rates, Gore said, global average temperatures could rise 11 degrees Fahrenheit.

"This would bring a screeching halt to human civilization and threaten life everywhere on Earth - and this is within the century," he said.

The United States "must take bold action now" to ensure dramatic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions and to shift the nation's energy supply away from fossil fuels, said Gore, who showed lawmakers a modified and updated version of his famous climate slide show.

Gore said lawmakers should take the first step in addressing the "climate crisis" by approving President Barack Obama's stimulus package.

The former Democratic senator from Tennessee praised provisions in the stimulus intended to boost energy efficiency and conservation, renewable energy production and clean car development, along with the inclusion of a plan to modernize the nation's electrical grid to allow far greater use of solar and wind energy.



The Sun and Planet Earth (Photo courtesy [NASA](#))



Former Vice

President Al Gore
(Photo [Scott Stillman](#))

"If we set our minds to it, we in this country could produce 100 percent of our electricity from renewable and carbon free sources in 10 years," Gore said. "That is possible."

The second step is to take "decisive action" to set a price on carbon - either through a tax or a cap-and-trade system - this year, Gore said.

The two moves will help the United States regain its credibility on the climate issue ahead of December's international climate treaty negotiations in Copenhagen, Gore added.

"And this treaty must be negotiated this year. Not next year. This year," he said. "A fair, effective and balanced treaty will put in place the global architecture that will place the world - at long last and in the nick of time - on a path toward solving the climate crisis and securing the future of human civilization."

Gore expressed optimism that President Obama's commitment to setting mandatory U.S. limits on greenhouse gases - and to working on a new international climate treaty - will help reverse "years of inaction" under the Bush administration.

The president has called for cutting the nation's greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent by 2050 and outlined a \$150 billion program to develop renewable energy resources. Democratic leaders in Congress have also voiced their support for such plans and there are some signs that a growing number of Republicans may be willing to jump on board.

Ranking Member of the committee, Republican Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, said, "The United States should recognize that steps to address climate change involve economic opportunities, not just constraints. Thanks to new technology, we can control many greenhouse gases with proactive, pro-growth solutions. Such technology represents an enormous opportunity for U.S. exports. But we have to have the will to develop, test, and implement these technologies on a truly urgent basis."

"President Obama must demand that research projects related to battery technology, cellulosic ethanol, carbon capture and storage, solar and wind power, and dozens of other technologies receive the highest priority within his administration," said Lugar.



Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana
(Photo courtesy Office of the Senator)

"We're now talking about firing real bullets," said Senator Bob Corker, a Tennessee Republican. "I think this year something may really occur."

But despite a major shift in attitude towards climate change in Washington, strong opponents and major hurdles, including a struggling economy, remain to forging a U.S. climate plan, let alone a binding global treaty.

Gore acknowledged such challenges, but argued that the nation's economic woes present even greater reason for aggressive action.

"Making this transition is one of the best and most effective ways to create good, new sustainable jobs quickly," Gore explained. "There is a tremendous growth in these new renewable industries and the world is beginning to shift dramatically in this direction. If the U.S. regains leadership ... we will create the most jobs and gain the most economic benefit."



**Senator John Kerry
of Massachusetts**
(Photo courtesy SFRC)

Committee chair John Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat, echoed these sentiments but further cautioned that tough action and hard choices lie ahead. "Frankly, the science is screaming at us," he said. "Right now, the most critical trends and facts all point in the wrong direction."

Kerry said that a recent study led by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology aggregated all the domestic policy proposals made throughout the world on climate change - including Obama's pledge - and found the sum impact far "short of what the science tells us must be done."

That study found that "if every nation made good on its existing promises ... we would still see atmospheric carbon dioxide levels well above 600 parts per million," Kerry said. "This translates into global temperatures at least four degrees Celsius above industrial levels and no one in the scientific community disputes that this would be catastrophic."

The atmospheric levels of CO₂ are currently at about 385 ppm, rising at some 2 to 2.5 ppm annually. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, levels were at about 280 ppm.

Gore said that it is "becoming more and more clear" that 350 ppm is the best goal for the world if catastrophic changes of global warming are to be avoided.

"If we are already at 380 now and the entire north polar icecap is completely melting in the next five years and both Greenland and West Antarctica are now clearly at risk, obviously we need to be below the level we are at now," he told the panel.

Gore also offered a sobering view of the future of coal in the United States, raising concerns about the future of technology to capture and sequester carbon emissions from the widely-used fossil fuel.

"We should not delude ourselves about the likelihood that that's going to occur in the near term or even the mid-term," Gore said. "It is extremely expensive, there is not a single large-scale demonstration plant anywhere in the United States."

"We must avoid becoming vulnerable to the illusion that this is near at hand," he said. "It is not."

Gore repeated his past call for a moratorium on new coal-fired power plants until the carbon capture and sequestration technology is viable, suggesting that lawmakers could easily find ways to address the economic concerns of the coal industry - in part by helping retrain workers affected by a shift away from the fossil fuel.

Gore said it makes little sense "to keep on doing this incredible damage and harm" to the planet just for the sake of the coal mining industry.