

Obama has a lot on his plate, but climate is paramount

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When he takes office in January, President-elect Obama will walk into a hornet's nest. He must find a way to turn the economy around, fix the health care system, resolve two wars, re-establish trust with our international allies, and restore the public's faith in government.

As vital as these issues are, they are not his most important task. History will best remember Obama for his ability to engage the United States in solving the climate crisis.

If he does not succeed here, little else will matter.

Three core principles can help guide the president's approach: tell the truth, act boldly and holistically, and focus on root causes.

Through his words and actions, Obama must tell the truth about the grave danger we face. Temperatures in the Arctic hit record levels in 2007, and this year they were 9 degrees Fahrenheit above normal. Scientists have also begun to document large releases of methane into the atmosphere from frozen seabeds. If this continues, global temperatures will climb to extreme levels. Americans must understand the gravity of the situation and the need for prompt action.

The president must also be candid about solutions. For instance, the climate crisis is not about energy independence, pollution or oil depletion, though these issues may be complementary. The primary cause of global warming is our use of fossil fuels, which adds more carbon dioxide to the greenhouse gas blanket that surrounds the Earth and traps heat. Any real solution to the problem must reduce the use of fossil fuels and the CO<sub>2</sub> they generate to insignificant levels.

This means talking straight about coal. No technologies exist to capture CO<sub>2</sub> from coal-fired power plants and sequester it underground for hundreds of years. In January the U.S. Energy Department scrapped its FutureGen Project, which sought to develop technologies to produce emissions-free coal plants. “Clean coal” does not exist. Emissions-free coal technologies are decades away, if they are possible at all. Coal must be rapidly phased out.

The federal government will spend more than \$700 million in 2008 on smoking prevention and cessation. The Obama administration should invest at least this much to dramatically improve the nation’s climate literacy. As part of this, the administration should consider requiring warning labels on oil, gas and coal stating that their use threatens life on Earth.

This leads to the second core principle. Obama says he supports cap and trade as a way to cut emissions. There is no denying the need for firm caps on emissions. The trading aspect of the scheme, however, is much less certain. Rather than relying on cap and trade alone, Obama should expand his policy horizons and act forcefully.

The most effective near-term strategy for reducing CO<sub>2</sub> is to change the behavior of households and firms and use available technologies to eliminate wasted energy use. The output the United States achieves from the energy it consumes is the lowest of any developed nation. This is an embarrassment.

During World War II, the government made waste unpatriotic by calling on citizens to eliminate unnecessary uses of gasoline and food. Obama should launch a similar campaign now and call on Americans to cut wasted energy in their homes, businesses and transportation by 20 percent or more. This won’t involve sacrifice, as it did in the war. Ample research shows conservation and efficiency saves money and improves productivity. And we have the know-how today to do it.

Solar, wind, nonfood-based biofuels and other forms of renewable energy are the long-term solutions to the climate crisis. But they need time to mature and scale up. If we make the right investments and adopt effective policies, by the time we have exhausted improvements in energy efficiency, renewables will be ready to take us the rest of the way to a carbon-free future.

Obama must boldly lead these initiatives and avoid narrow approaches to the climate crisis.

Which brings me to the third, and most important, principle of success.

At its core, climate change is not really an energy, technology or policy problem. It is a crisis of thought.

For more than a century Americans have believed it was possible to continually release massive amounts of carbon dioxide into the Earth's atmosphere without ill effects. The climate crisis shows how wrong this thinking is.

Obama must use his bully pulpit to paint a new vision of an emissions-free economy in the minds of Americans. He must then empower households, businesses and governments to consider their carbon footprint in every decision they make. Without a change in thinking, we cannot stabilize the climate.

Tell the truth, act boldly and holistically, and focus on the root cause: These are Obama's keys to solving the climate crisis.

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