

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks Announcing the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Power Plan

August 3, 2015

The President. Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you. Well, good afternoon, everybody.

Audience members. Good afternoon.

The President. Gina, I want to thank you not just for the introduction, but for the incredible work that you and your team have been doing, not just on this issue, but on generally making sure that we've got clean air, clean water—a great future for our kids.

I want to thank all the Members of Congress who are here as well, who have been fighting this issue and, sometimes, at great odds with others, but are willing to take on what is going to be one of the key challenges of our lifetimes and future generations. I want to thank our Surgeon General, who's just been doing outstanding work and is helping to make the connection between this critical issue and the health of our families.

Over the past 6½ years, we've taken on some of the toughest challenges of our time, from rebuilding our economy after a devastating recession, to ending our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and bringing almost all of our troops home, to strengthening our security through tough and principled diplomacy. But I am convinced that no challenge poses a greater threat to our future and future generations than a changing climate. And that's what brings us here today.

Now, not everyone here is a scientist—[laughter]—but some of you are among the best scientists in the world. And what you and your colleagues have been showing us for years now is that human activities are changing the climate in dangerous ways. Levels of carbon dioxide, which heats up our atmosphere, are higher than they've been in 800,000 years; 2014 was the planet's warmest year on record. And we've been setting a lot of records in terms of warmest years over the last decade. One year doesn't make a trend, but 14 of the 15 warmest years on record have fallen within the first 15 years of this century.

Climate change is no longer just about the future that we're predicting for our children or our grandchildren, it's about the reality that we're living with every day, right now. The Pentagon says that climate change poses immediate risks to our national security. While we can't say any single weather event is entirely caused by climate change, we've seen stronger storms, deeper droughts, longer wildfire seasons. Charleston and Miami now flood at high tide. Shrinking ice caps forced National Geographic to make the biggest change in its atlas since the Soviet Union broke apart.

Over the past three decades, nationwide asthma rates have more than doubled, and climate change puts those Americans at greater risk of landing in the hospital. As one of America's Governors has said, "We're the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last generation that can do something about it." And that's why I committed the United States to leading the world on this challenge, because I believe there is such a thing as being too late.

Most of the issues that I deal with—and I deal with some tough issues that cross my desk—by definition: I don't deal with issues if they're easy to solve because somebody else has already solved them. [*Laughter*] And some of them are grim. Some of them are heartbreaking. Some of them are hard. Some of them are frustrating. But most of the time, the issues we deal with are ones that are temporally bound and we can anticipate things getting better if we just kind of plug away at it, even incrementally. But this is one of those rare issues—because of its magnitude, because of its scope—that if we don't get it right, we may not be able to reverse, and we may not be able to adapt sufficiently. There is such a thing as being too late when it comes to climate change.

Now, that doesn't—that shouldn't make us hopeless; it's not as if there's nothing we can do about it. We can take action. Over the past several years, America has been working to use less dirty energy, more clean energy, waste less energy throughout our economy. We've set new fuel economy standards that mean our cars will go twice as far on a gallon of gas by the middle of the next decade. Combined with lower gas prices, these standards are on pace to save drivers an average of \$700 at the pump this year. We doubled down on our investment in renewable energy. We're generating three times as much wind power, 20 times as much solar power as we did in 2008.

These steps are making a difference. Over the past decade, even as our economy has continued to grow, the United States has cut our total carbon pollution more than any other nation on Earth. That's the good news. But I am here to say that if we want to protect our economy and our security and our children's health, we're going to have to do more. The science tells us we have to do more.

This has been our focus these past 6 years. And it's particularly going to be our focus this month. In Nevada, later in August, I'll talk about the extraordinary progress we've made in generating clean energy—and the jobs that come with it—and how we can boost that even further. I'll also be the first American President to visit the Alaskan Arctic, where our fellow Americans have already seen their communities devastated by melting ice and rising oceans, the impact on marine life. We're going to talk about what the world needs to do together to prevent the worst impacts of climate change before it's too late.

And today we're here to announce America's Clean Power Plan: a plan 2 years in the making and the single most important step America has ever taken in the fight against global climate change.

Now, right now our power plants are the source of about a third of America's carbon pollution. That's more pollution than our cars, our airplanes, and our homes generate combined. That pollution contributes to climate change, which degrades the air our kids breathe. But there have never been Federal limits on the amount of carbon that power plants can dump into the air. Think about that. We limit the amount of toxic chemicals like mercury and sulfur and arsenic in our air or our water, and we're better off for it. But existing power plants can still dump unlimited amounts of harmful carbon pollution into the air.

For the sake of our kids and the health and safety of all Americans, that has to change. For the sake of the planet, that has to change. So 2 years ago, I directed Gina and the Environmental Protection Agency to take on this challenge. And today, after working with States and cities and power companies, the EPA is setting the first-ever nationwide standards to end the limitless dumping of carbon pollution from power plants.

Here's how it works: over the next few years, each State will have the chance to put together its own plan for reducing emissions, because every State has a different energy mix. Some generate more of their power from renewables, some from natural gas or nuclear or coal. And this plan reflects the fact that not everybody is starting in the same place. So we're giving States the time and the flexibility they need to cut pollution in a way that works for them.

And we'll reward the States that take action sooner instead of later, because time is not on our side here. As States work to meet their targets, they can build on the progress that our communities and businesses are already making.

A lot of power companies have already begun modernizing their plants, reducing their emissions and, by the way, creating new jobs in the process. Nearly a dozen States have already set up their own market-based programs to reduce carbon pollution. About half of our States have set energy efficiency targets. More than 35 have set renewable energy targets. Over a thousand mayors have signed an agreement to cut carbon pollution in their cities. And last week, 13 of our biggest companies, including UPS and Walmart and GM, made bold, new commitments to cut their emissions and deploy more clean energy.

So the idea of setting standards and cutting carbon pollution is not new. It's not radical. What is new is that, starting today, Washington is starting to catch up with the vision of the rest of the country. And by setting these standards, we can actually speed up our transition to a cleaner, safer future.

With this Clean Power Plan, by 2030, carbon pollution from our power plants will be 32 percent lower than it was a decade ago. And the nerdier way to say that is that we'll be keeping 870 million tons of carbon dioxide pollution out of our atmosphere. The simpler, layman's way of saying that is, it's like cutting every ounce of emission due to electricity from 108 million American homes. Or it's the equivalent of taking 166 million cars off the road.

By 2030, we will reduce premature deaths from power plant emissions by nearly 90 percent, and thanks to this plan, there will be 90,000 fewer asthma attacks among our children each year. And by combining this with greater investment in our booming clean energy sector and smarter investments in energy efficiency and by working with the world to achieve a climate agreement by the end of this year, we can do more to slow—and maybe even eventually stop—the carbon pollution that's doing so much harm to our climate.

So this is the right thing to do. I want to thank, again, Gina and her team for doing it the right way. Over the longest engagement process in EPA history, they fielded more than 4 million public comments, they worked with States, they worked with power companies and environmental groups and faith groups and people across our country to make sure that what we were doing was realistic and achievable, but still ambitious.

And some of those people are with us here today. So Tanya Brown—Tanya, wave, go ahead. There's Tanya. Tanya Brown has joined up with moms across America to spread the word about the dangers climate change pose to the health of our children, including Tanya's daughter Sanaa. There's Sanaa, right there. *[Laughter]* Dr. Sumita Khatri has spent her career researching the health impacts of pollution at the Cleveland Clinic and helping families whose lives are impacted every single day. Doctor, thank you. Sister Joan Marie Steadman has helped rally Catholic women across America to take on climate. Sister, thank you so much for your leadership. And she's got a pretty important guy on her side: As Pope Francis made clear in his encyclical this summer, taking a stand against climate change is a moral obligation. And Sister Steadman is living up to that obligation every single day.

Now, let's be clear. There will be critics of what we're trying to do. There will be cynics that say it cannot be done. Long before the details of this Clean Power Plan were even decided, the special interests and their allies in Congress were already mobilizing to oppose it with everything they've got. They will claim that this plan will cost you money, even though this plan, the analysis shows, will ultimately save the average American nearly \$85 a year on their energy bills.

They'll claim we need to slash our investments in clean energy, it's a waste of money, even though they're happy to spend billions of dollars a year in subsidizing oil companies. They'll claim this plan will kill jobs, even though our transition to a cleaner energy economy has the solar industry, to just name one example, creating jobs 10 times faster than the rest of the economy.

They'll claim this plan is a "war on coal," to scare up votes, even as they ignore my plan to actually invest in revitalizing coal country and supporting health care and retirement for coal miners and their families and retraining those workers for better paying jobs and healthier jobs. Communities across America have been losing coal jobs for decades. I want to work with Congress to help them, not to use them as a political football. Partisan press releases aren't going to help those families.

Even more cynical—[*laughter*]*—*we've got critics of this plan who are actually claiming that this will harm minority and low-income communities, even though climate change hurts those Americans the most, who are the most vulnerable. Today, an African American child is more than twice as likely to be hospitalized from asthma; a Latino child is 40 percent more likely to die from asthma. So if you care about low-income, minority communities, start protecting the air that they breathe and stop trying to rob them of their health care. And the—you could also expand Medicaid in your States, by the way; that would help. [*Laughter*]

Here's the thing: We've heard these same stale arguments before. Every time America has made progress, it's been despite these kind of claims. Whenever America has set clear rules and smarter standards for our air, our water, our children's health, we get the same scary stories about killing jobs and businesses and freedom. It's the——

Audience member. [*Inaudible*]

The President. It's true. I'm going to go off script here just for a second—[*laughter*]*—*because this is important. Because sometimes, I think we feel as if there's nothing we can do. What—tomorrow's my birthday, so I'm starting to reflect on age. And in thinking about what we were doing here today, I was reminded about landing in Los Angeles to attend a college as a freshman, as an 18-year-old. And it was late August. I was moving from Hawaii. And I got to the campus, and I decided I had a lot of pent-up energy, and I wanted to go take a run. And after about 5 minutes, suddenly, I had this weird feeling; I couldn't breathe. And the reason was, is back in 1979, Los Angeles still was so full of smog that there were days where people who were vulnerable just could not go outside, and they were fairly frequent.

And folks who are older than me can remember the Cuyahoga River being—burning because of pollution and acid rain threatening to destroy all the great forests of the Northeast. And you fast-forward 30, 40 years later, and we solved those problems. But at the time, the same characters who are going to be criticizing this plan were saying, this is going to kill jobs, this is going to destroy businesses, this is going to hurt low-income people, it's going to be wildly expensive. And each time, they were wrong.

And because we pushed through, despite those scaremongering tactics, you can actually run in Los Angeles without choking. And folks can actually take a boat out on that river. And those forests are there.

So we've got to learn lessons. We've got to know our history. The kinds of criticisms that you're going to hear are simply excuses for inaction. They're not even good business sense. They underestimate American business and American ingenuity.

In 1970, when Republican President Richard Nixon decided to do something about the smog that was choking our cities, they warned that the new pollution standards would decimate the auto industry. It didn't happen. Catalytic converters worked. Taking the lead out of gasoline worked. Our air got cleaner.

In 1990, when Republican President George H.W. Bush decided to do something about acid rain, they said the bills would go up, our lights would go off, businesses would suffer "a quiet death." It didn't happen. We cut acid rain dramatically, and it cost much less than anybody expected, because businesses, once incentivized, were able to figure it out.

When we restricted leaded fuel in our cars, cancer-causing chemicals in plastics, it didn't end the oil industry; it didn't end the plastics industry. American chemists came up with better substitutes. The fuel standards we put in place a couple of years ago didn't cripple automakers. The American auto industry retooled. Today, our automakers are selling the best cars in the world at a faster pace than they have in almost a decade. They've got more hybrids and more plug-ins and more high-fuel-efficient cars, giving consumers more choice than ever before and saving families at the pump.

We can figure this stuff out as long as we're not lazy about it, as long as we don't take the path of least resistance. Scientists, citizens, workers, entrepreneurs—together as Americans, we disrupt those stale, old debates, upend old ways of thinking. Right now we're inventing whole new technologies, whole new industries, not looking backwards, we're looking forwards.

And if we don't do it, nobody will. The only reason that China is now looking at getting serious about its emissions is because they saw that we were going to do it too. When the world's—when the world faces its toughest challenges, America leads the way forward; that's what this plan is about.

Now, I don't want to fool you here. This is going to be hard; dealing with climate change in its entirety, it's challenging. No single action, no single country will change the warming of the planet on its own. But today, with America leading the way, countries representing 70 percent of the carbon pollution from the world's energy sector have announced plans to cut their greenhouse gas emissions. In December, with America leading the way, we have a chance to put in place one of the most ambitious international climate agreements in human history.

And it's easy to be cynical and to say climate change is the kind of challenge it's just too big for humanity to solve. I am absolutely convinced that's wrong. We can solve this thing. But we have to get going. It's exactly the kind of challenge that's big enough to remind us that we're all in this together.

Last month, for the first time since 1972, NASA released a Blue Marble: a single snapshot of the Earth taken from outer space. And so much has changed in the decades between that first picture and the second. Borders have shifted, generations have come and gone, our global population has nearly doubled. But one thing hasn't changed: Our planet is as beautiful as ever. It still looks blue. And it's as vast, but also as fragile, as miraculous as anything in this universe.

This Blue Marble belongs to all of us. It belongs to these kids who are here. There are more than 7 billion people alive today; no matter what country they're from, no matter what language they speak, every one of them can look at this image and say, "That's my home." And "we're the first generation to feel the impact of climate change; we're the last generation that can do something about it." We only get one home. We only get one planet. There's no plan B.

I don't want my grandkids not to be able to swim in Hawaii or not to be able to climb a mountain and see a glacier because we didn't do something about it. I don't want millions of people's lives disrupted and this world more dangerous because we didn't do something about it. That'd be shameful of us. This is our moment to get this right and leave something better for our kids. Let's make most of that opportunity.

Thank you, everybody. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:15 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Regina McCarthy; U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek H. Murthy; Gov. Jay R. Inslee of Washington; Tanya Brown, member, Moms Clean Air Force—North Carolina, and her daughter Sanaa; Sumita Khatri, Asthma Center codirector, Cleveland Clinic; and Joan Marie Steadman, executive director, Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

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