

United States re-joins the Paris Agreement

On February 19 2021, the first day in office of President Biden, the United States rejoined the [Paris Agreement](#)ⁱ. President Trump had previously fulfilled his own election promise to withdraw the USA from this historic treaty which aims to keep the rise in global temperatures well below 2°C.

What will be the effect on emissions?

Rejoining the Paris Agreement sent a clear message to the world that the USA has returned to the consensus view. It is the first step in many that President Biden outlined during his campaign and in his time in office so far. These include:



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- * **Raising US target to reduce GHG emissions:** At Paris in 2015, the US pledged to reduce its emissions by 26-28% by 2025, relative to 2005 levels. President Biden hosted a significant Climate Leaders Summitⁱⁱ in April 2021 and announced a new target for USA to reduce GHG emissions by 50-52% by 2030. Several major emitting countries followed suitⁱⁱⁱ (see this [Climate Action Tracker](#) for up to date information).
- * **The Biden Plan:** Similar to the 'Green New Deal', this is a comprehensive plan^{iv} to reimagine the economy, creating 'green' jobs and reducing inequality whilst tackling climate change and other environmental crises.
- * **Transitioning the USA to 100% clean energy:** At the same time, the aim is to move away from fossil fuels and coal, and towards renewable energy sources by 2050.
- * **Protecting nature and wildlife:** The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a large area in Alaska that President Trump opened for oil and natural gas drilling; President Biden has promised to reverse this and make it a national park to protect the ecosystem and the wildlife living there.

What challenges will President Biden face?

How realistic is an ambitious US target to reduce emissions?

In 2019, USA was the biggest producer of oil in the world, producing a record of almost 13 million barrels per day^v. USA exports of hydrocarbons (crude oil, diesel, gasoline, propane) to other countries have also increased^{vi}. The COVID pandemic has had a big impact on demand, however, and unprecedented cold weather in the major oil producing areas including Texas has hit production in 2021. Fracking technology has also resulted in a huge increase in cheap natural gas.



Image Pfc Jeremiah Handeland

The substitution of natural gas for coal and the substantial growth of renewable energy, such as this solar power plant in the Mojave Desert, have had a combined effect and there has been a continuing decline in CO₂ emissions in USA since 2015.

Whilst the EC Joint Research Centre reports^{vii} that total emissions in have fallen and are 14% lower than 2005 levels, USA still has the highest emissions per person of the world's major emitters.

What is the political 'climate'?

In the USA, the President must work with both chambers of Congress and have their support for legislation to be adopted. Until the next election in 2022, the majority of Congress is Democratic, and the Senate is split 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans (Vice-President Kamala Harris has a casting vote in the Senate). Currently, President Biden has a much stronger chance of putting through policies that would support climate action, although he could still face some opposition from the Senate^{viii}. Despite political divisions, there is growing public pressure and this could be an opportunity for large-scale change in the US.

Where is the inside pressure to reduce emissions?

US States and Cities:

Although President Biden has control over federal laws, each state has its own Governor and legislative powers.

- * California, as with several other states, is using this power to go beyond the Paris Agreement requirements and has set a state target to be completely carbon neutral by 2045. It is at the forefront of Climate Action.
- * States like Minnesota have policy proposals that will lead to 100% clean energy by 2050^{ix}
- * On the other hand, some states like Wyoming still rely on coal mining for a large part of their economy^x.

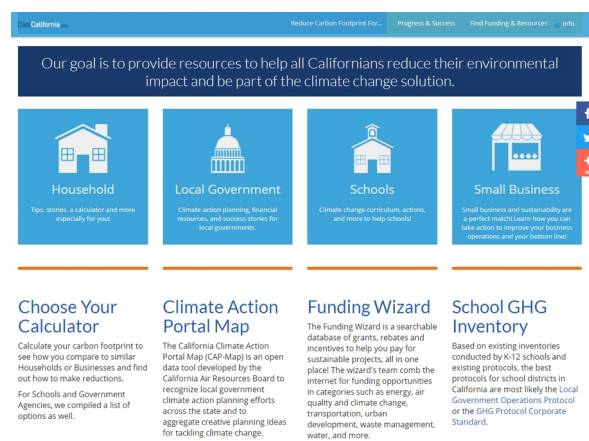


Image: CoolCalifornia.org homepage

Vocal response to the Climate Crisis:

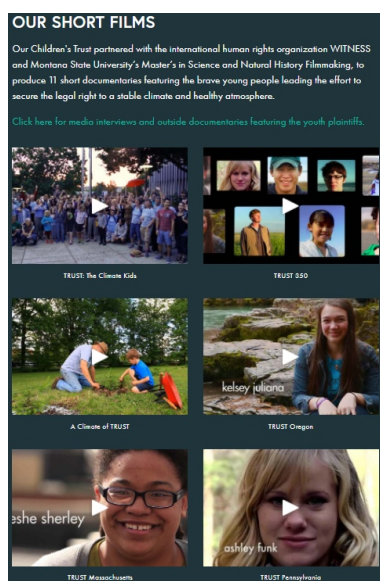


Image: www.ourchildrenstrust.org short films page

- * Climate change is an increasingly important issue for voters, with almost 40% citing climate concerns as one of their main issues in 2020^{xi}. With a growing awareness about the environment, there is more and more pressure on politicians to put forward more progressive policies.
- * Alongside the growing public awareness of climate change, there are more legal cases being raised, many led by young people, to protect the environment - and people - from companies trying to pollute land, air, and water. Over 130 cases were raised in 2020 alone^{xii}.
- * There are also many companies that are leaders in climate action. Tesla has made electric vehicles mainstream, while tech giants like Apple, Google and Facebook are committed to 100% renewable energy.
- * Even with COVID-19 making it difficult to organize large climate strikes, organizations like Fridays for Future, 350.org, and SustainUS switched to digital climate strikes and continue to be a powerful force.

Questions to explore *(References are shown overleaf to aid further research)*

1. How big a role does the President have in shaping climate policy?
2. What action has to be taken to keep the USA within the emissions targets set by the Paris agreement?
3. What is The Biden Climate Plan, and how is it similar or different to the European Green New Deal?
4. How important are individual states to the action taken by the Federal government?

Authors

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References

Whilst we strive to provide only links to useful and ethical websites, we have no control over their content. The links do not imply a recommendation for all the content found on these sites.

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- i Paris Climate Agreement: <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/paris-climate-agreement-everything-you-need-know> [accessed 26 April 2021]
 - ii USA revised emissions target: [FACT SHEET: President Biden’s Leaders Summit on Climate | The White House](#) and [The U.S. Has a New Climate Goal. How Does It Stack Up Globally? - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#) [both accessed 26 April 2021]
 - iii Climate Summit article (ICN) [US Climate Summit: the power of youth - InterClimate Network](#) [accessed 27 May 2021]
 - iv The Biden Plan for a Clean Energy Revolution and Environmental Justice [Plan for Climate Change and Environmental Justice | Joe Biden](#) [accessed 27 May 2021] *and*
US Government Climate Plan: <https://joebiden.com/climate-plan/> [accessed 25 April 2021]
 - v Report on US Oil Production: [U.S. Oil Production Saw The Largest Decline Ever In 2020 | OilPrice.com](#) [accessed 26 April 2021]
 - vi Energy Information Administration information on hydrocarbons: [Imports and exports of hydrocarbon gas liquids - U.S. Energy Information Administration \(EIA\)](#) [accessed 26 April 2021]
 - vii European Commission Joint Research Centre (2020) Fossil CO2 emissions of all world countries: <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/41811494-f131-11e8-9982-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> [accessed 26 April 2021] *and*
[EDGAR - The Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research \(europa.eu\)](#) [accessed 27 May 2021]
 - viii New York Times: [10 Challenges Biden Faces in Righting the Economy - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#) [accessed 25 April 2021]
 - ix United Nations Foundation: <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/7-ways-u-s-states-are-leading-climate-action/> [accessed 25 April 2021]
 - x Energy Information Administration <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/coal/where-our-coal-comes-from.php> [accessed 25 April 2021]
 - xi Reuters News Agency: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-climate-voters/climate-change-climbs-up-u-s-voters-list-of-concerns-idUKKCN1SM2WW> [accessed 25 April 2021]
 - xii Columbia Law School and Arnold & Porter Climate Case Chart: <http://climatecasechart.com/us-climate-change-litigation/> [accessed 25 April 2021]