

# Obama launches plan to fight climate change in US

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Climate change just got personal – or at least, that's how President Barack Obama is selling the idea of taking action on climate change to the American people.

Launching his [long-awaited plan to combat climate change](#) today, Obama explicitly linked current hardships to our planet's warming trend: "Farmers see crops wilted one year, washed away the next, and the higher food prices get passed on to you," he told an audience at Georgetown University in Washington DC.

With the Republican majority in the House of Representatives blocking any attempt to pass comprehensive legislation to curb greenhouse gas emissions, the [plan stresses regulations under the Clean Air Act](#), principally new limits on emissions from power plants.

In a surprise move, the president also weighed in on the [controversial Keystone XL pipeline](#), planned to transport oil from Canada's tar sands to refineries on the Gulf of Mexico – suggesting that it will go ahead only if it causes no increase in carbon emissions.

"The net effects of climate impact will be absolutely critical to determining whether this project will go forward," Obama said.

## Devil in the details

By far the biggest reduction in emissions will come from new rules on carbon emissions from both new and existing power plants. The devil will be in the details of the rules, which will not be finalised until 2015. But depending on how they are written, independent analysts have suggested that the regulations could put the US on track [to meet](#), or [even surpass](#), its stated target of reducing its emissions by 17 per cent from 2005 levels, by 2020.

While their effects will be dwarfed by the power plant rules, the plan also includes some new initiatives to further trim emissions, including granting permits to generate an extra 10 gigawatts of renewable energy on US public lands by 2020 – enough to power about 2.6 million homes.

New energy-efficiency standards for appliances and federal buildings should also prevent some 3 billion tonnes of carbon entering the atmosphere between now and 2030 – or nearly two years' worth of emissions from US coal-fired power plants.

"The president has used every lever that he has," says [Jennifer Morgan](#), director of the Climate and Energy Program of the World Resources Institute in Washington DC. "If the plan is fully implemented, it can reset the agenda for this country."

## Acid test

Importantly, the plan also calls for the US to take a lead in international efforts to curb global warming. The acid test will come in 2015, when nations will meet in Paris to agree to limits on

emissions beyond 2020 – when deep cuts will be needed if the planet is to have any chance of [avoiding "dangerous" climate change](#).

What the US is achieving at home will be crucial to its credibility in these talks. "Showing an intent to de-carbonise your power sector is tremendously important when sitting across the table from China," says Morgan.

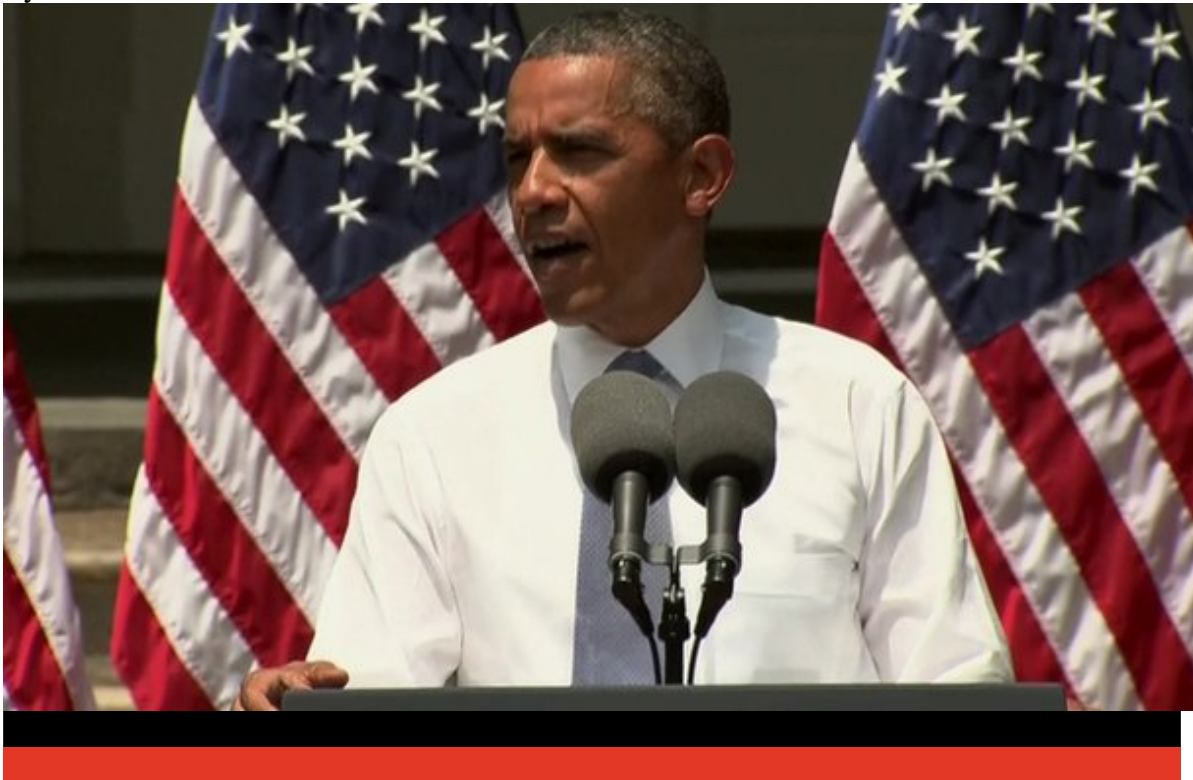
Other countries may also view the Keystone XL as a bellwether of the US's resolve. By suggesting that approval should be given only if the pipeline does not cause an overall increase in emissions, Obama is likely to set off a new fight over those numbers.

In March, [the US State Department stated](#) that the project was unlikely to have much impact on the rate at which Canada's oil sands are developed, suggesting that the oil would be transported by rail if the pipeline were not built. But the US Environmental Protection Agency has since questioned this conclusion, arguing that the final environmental impact assessment would need a "[more careful review of the market analysis and rail transport options](#)".

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## Obama lays out climate action plan

By Paul Rincon Science editor, BBC News website



President Obama said he would use his executive powers to enforce the new rules on reduction of greenhouse gas emissions

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US President Barack Obama has laid out a package of measures aimed at curbing climate change, including limits on emissions from power plants.

He also unveiled plans for an expansion of renewable energy projects, improved flood resilience and calls for an international climate deal.

Administration officials had earlier rejected the idea of a "carbon tax".

President Obama pledged in his inaugural address in January to act on climate change in his second term.

'Moral obligation'

Speaking at Georgetown University in Washington DC, President Obama said: "As a president, as a father and as an American, I am here to say we need to act."

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### “Start Quote

On the international level however the promises for action, while welcome, are too little too late”

Saleemul Huq International Institute for Environment and Development  
President Obama mocked critics who contend climate change is not a threat.

"I don't have much patience for anyone who denies that this challenge is real," he said. "We don't have time for a meeting of the Flat Earth Society."

The president said climate change posed an immediate threat, with the 12 hottest years on record all occurring in the past 15 years.

He added: "While we may not live to see the full realisation of our ambition, we will have the satisfaction of knowing that the world we leave to our children will be better off for what we did."

Most of the president's agenda can be executed without congressional approval, but some issues are likely to face opposition.

The top Republican in the House of Representatives, House Speaker John Boehner, has called the plans "absolutely crazy".

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### Analysis



Roger Harrabin Environment analyst

Finally, 16 years after the global agreement to tackle climate change in the Kyoto Protocol, the world can see how the US intends to play its part. It may be cutting CO2 only 4% on 1990 levels by 2020 - less than a fifth of the amount achieved in the EU - but this is at least a plan, and some of the US green think-tanks are grateful for it.

But this is part of what the White House calls an "all of the above" strategy which includes new efficiency standards on trucks, electrical appliances and government buildings - a change that will lift the US out of the 1950s design age; a reduction in short-lived greenhouse gases like methane and soot; a further doubling of wind power, especially on public land; future-proofing infrastructure against climate damages and more.

There are things to upset environmentalists, like the absence of any commitment to drop Keystone XL and the continuing support for biofuels. Nor is the plan as precisely quantified as the UK's climate policy, for instance, which commits to methodically cutting emissions through to 2050. But if the president has the stomach for a legal fight over bypassing Congress on coal, if he's willing to impose extra measures in a few years and if his policies don't get overturned, today's announcement could help the US achieve its international carbon pledges up to 2020. That would be a start.

On Tuesday, the president reaffirmed his 2009 commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 17% below 2005 levels by the end of the decade.

Critics say these reductions are too modest, and less aggressive than European Union targets.

The plan includes the first-ever limits on carbon emissions from new and existing power plants. These are the single biggest source of carbon pollution, accounting for a third of US greenhouse gas emissions and 40% of its carbon output.

But it remains unclear how strict these limits will be.

Last year, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed regulating emissions from new power plants, but that plan was delayed.

Seven US governors have [asked President Obama](#) to abandon this proposal, which they say would "effectively shutter" coal-fired power plants and prevent the construction of new ones.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican, said imposing carbon rules on power plants amounted to a "war on coal".

"This is a huge step in the wrong direction, particularly in the middle of the most tepid recovery after a deep recession in anyone's memory," Mr McConnell said.

President Obama also called for the US to stop supporting new coal-fired plants abroad.

His plan would exempt plants in the poorest nations if the cleanest technology available in those countries is being used.

Pipeline challenge



Obama: "We don't have time for a meeting of the Flat Earth Society"

President Obama called for more solar and wind energy projects on public lands, with the aim of powering the equivalent of six million homes by 2020. He also set higher goals for renewable energy at federal housing projects.

In addition, he announced \$8bn (£5bn) in federal loan guarantees to spur investment in green technologies.

President Obama also broached the subject of the \$7bn, 1,700 mile (2,700km) Keystone XL pipeline, meant to bring heavy crude from the tar sands of Alberta, Canada to the refineries of Texas, saying it should only proceed if it was in the nation's interest.

"The net effects of the pipeline's impact on the climate will be absolutely critical to deciding whether this project goes forward," he said.

Backed by industry and labour unions but staunchly opposed by green campaigners, Keystone XL has turned into one of the [biggest environmental challenges](#) of the president's time in office.

Saleemul Huq, senior fellow at the International Institute for Environment and Development, said the plan was "too little too late".

"While it is good to see a leader of the world's richest country and biggest cumulative polluter finally promise to take actions," he said, "after over a decade of refusal to do so, the problem has become much bigger while the US was ignoring it."

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