

Compact for the American Future

Defeating Climate Change and Building a More Sustainable Future

The COVID-19 pandemic, in a matter of only months, has completely altered the globe. In terms of events with global ramifications, it rivals perhaps only climate change in its scale, scope, and impact. And like climate change, COVID-19 has proven to disproportionately impact communities of color, especially in the United States.

The two issues are interrelated – and both require immediate attention and action. But too often, a lack of political will has gotten in the way of necessary change. Americans have and will continue to pay the price.

According to the major 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [special report](#), the window to reverse catastrophic climate change is narrowing. If we continue at our current rate, global warming is likely to reach 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels between 2030 and 2052. We're nearing on nine years left to stop irreversible damage due to climate change and make our planet a safe and healthy place to live.

It will take ambition, collaboration, and grit to solve these challenges – something Americans are no strangers to. By tackling the climate crisis and preparing for pandemics through the lens of climate, we will be on our way to building a better future for every American, no matter their race or geography. And critically, by going all-in on solving this crisis, we can create millions of good-paying, union jobs and get so many who lost their jobs during COVID-19 back to work.

In the next installment of the **Compact for the American Future**, we're delving into our most pressing and greatest test: *Defeating Climate Change and Building a More Sustainable Future*.

Pandemic Preparedness and Response

The COVID crisis has underscored the legacy of the climate crisis and its disproportionate impact on communities of color. It has also brought to light the urgent need to make our country more sustainable so we can be better prepared to fend off the next pandemic. Here's some of the steps we can take now in the months ahead:

- Deaths from COVID-19 have been shown to be linked to exposure to toxic air pollution. It is critical that we reduce **greenhouse gas emissions** and improve our air quality, especially for communities of color.
- We must lead with a bold **climate justice plan** to address inequities in the impact of COVID-19 that are explained by systemic racism. We need a top-down approach with major policy changes, coupled with community-level engagement and education.
- Further, we must **address compound risks**, including storms, flooding, droughts, extreme heat, fires, and other climate-related events that heighten displacement during a pandemic. We must put into place national, regional, and state-level plans for safety and evacuation procedures that minimize virus spread when people are forced to seek shelter. Prevention measures for these climate

- events must take into account the pandemic risk, and ahead of time understand the compounded effect they can have on the healthcare system and economy in the midst of a pandemic.
- Beyond disaster preparedness and acute emergency response, the appropriate level of government must ensure **continuity of essential services**, including water, electricity and other basic utilities. For example, state governments can implement measures to ensure that utility companies do not turn off electricity or deny service in extreme weather to households that are behind on payments.
 - To mitigate multiplier risks and synergist effects of climate change and health crises, we must **invest in public health** and tackle underlying conditions, such as poverty, socioeconomic and racial disparities, hunger, and an inequitable healthcare delivery system.
 - Climate change impacts every single species on Earth and that matters. As the planet warms, animals are migrating to the poles to avoid heat – which means more species are in contact and there is a greater risk for pathogens to get into new hosts and spread to humans. Addressing the **root causes of climate change, including deforestation**, can stop the loss of habitat and biodiversity that ultimately allows pathogens to thrive and pandemics to happen.
 - We can also **rework our agricultural processes** to reduce the raising of animals in unhealthy and close quarters that lead to disease transmission between animals and into humans. Further, we can take a serious look at how our diet and food production are harming our population-level health, making us less resilient to pandemics like COVID-19.
 - Respiratory diseases, like COVID-19, are exacerbated by underlying conditions such as asthma. And asthma disproportionately impacts people of color. We must **reduce the disparities in asthma** and improve our air quality to lower disease insistence overall. One way to do this – reducing air pollution caused by burning fossil fuels.
 - One reason indoor activities have been difficult or impossible to resume during COVID-19 is due to lacking ventilation and filtration systems in buildings. This is especially apparent in schools – which have been systematically underfunded for years. It's time we **fully fund and modernize the infrastructure underpinning our public-school systems**, with an emphasis on **installing ventilators** that can quickly filter out air and reduce the spread of illness through respiratory droplets.
 - As mentioned in a previous Compact for the American Future memo – but worth restating – we must reinstate the **pandemic response unit at the National Security Council**.
 - The **Department of Health and Human Services must play a role in understanding social determinants of health** and how they interact with climate to achieve health equity both broadly and in the face of a pandemic or climate disaster.
 - Our climate intersects with every aspect of our existence. It would be misguided and dangerous to not look at the inextricable links between climate change and this pandemic – or any pandemic, for that matter. In the following sections, we will discuss a bold agenda to **solve our climate crisis** and rebuild a better, more resilient future for all.

Defeating Climate Change Head-On

Climate change is a massive, global problem. The impacts of climate change are existential to our communities, health, economy, security, and lives. It will take courage, coordination, and forward-thinking to defeat it. Look no further than the unfathomable wildfires raging across the West coast over three million acres, with millions breathing in toxic air. Climate-induced event after event are cascading around the country and the window to reverse the impacts of climate change is dwindling.

Tackling climate change not only will improve the health of the planet and the people who inhabit it, but will also create jobs, improve the health of communities, and build a more sustainable future. Here's how we can build a green energy future by tackling climate change and global warming head-on:

- We must drastically **reduce greenhouse gas emissions and realize a clean energy economy with net-zero emissions by no later than 2050**. This should include federal and state-level enforcement mechanisms that are bound in law to reach milestones.
- The U.S. must immediately and in large-scale **invest in low-carbon energy sources** such as wind and solar to reduce harmful air pollutants. Investing in the climate technology we need can be done through numerous funding streams, including holding big polluters accountable, closing tax loopholes, ending government subsidies for fossil fuel companies, and tapping into private sector dollars and innovation.
- We can jumpstart our economy and make our workforce more resilient to climate change by **ramping up investments in low-carbon technologies**. This includes conducting more research into solutions that would reduce airline emissions.
- Improving our climate means improving our infrastructure, so we are a more resilient country and world. We must make the **significant infrastructure investments** discussed in the *Building America's Infrastructure* memo of this series. Investments like rebuilding and modernizing our schools, fixing our roads and crumbling bridges, modernizing our seaports, building smart cities, and more.
- Investing in infrastructure has the added benefit of creating **millions of good-paying jobs** toward building a clean energy future. We must focus on national and community-based efforts to create the pipeline of clean energy workers. That includes education, vocational training, expanded apprenticeship programs, and opportunities for Americans no matter their race or zip code.
- We must empower American workers through **labor and health standards** and ensure that **unions are able to prosper in the green economy**, allowing workers to organize for better wages, benefits and working conditions.
- Going big on solving climate change offers an opportunity to **build American**. The federal government can stipulate that go-forward projects use American-made materials, like aluminum and steel.
- New jobs should go far beyond green energy jobs. We can also grow the workforce and spur the economy with renewed focus on **public health, the auto industry, STEM, and much more**.

- The next president should expand the cabinet to include a **climate secretary**. There is no issue more important or intersectional than our climate. It's time we have a **coordinated national effort out of the White House and among the federal, state and local governments**.
- Climate change is not just a threat to the planet, but it's also a threat to our national security, health and healthcare, and economy. The next president should seek to build out a robust **climate department** overseen by the new climate secretary. Other leading countries have established federal agencies specifically designed to address climate change and in the United States, along with a technology department, a climate department is sorely missing.
- Our public transportation is outdated, inefficient, and inequitable. We need to provide our cities with **zero-emissions public transit at little or no cost to city residents**. Cities should make plans to increase bike lane and pedestrian access so Americans can get around without gas emissions.
- The foundation of resilient communities are resilient homes and buildings. We must invest in **affordable housing**, so every single family has the opportunity to put a roof over their head that is up to codes and safety standards and are energy efficient. We must also invest in **upgrading our buildings for current sustainability standards and weatherize millions of homes and buildings**.
- Congress needs to incentivize and/or require that **American companies are carbon-neutral** in their supply and operations.
- We must firmly set **fuel efficiency standards** while also incentivizing both the auto industry and American consumers to increase production and use of **zero-emissions vehicles**. States should look into following California's lead in requiring passenger **vehicles sold in the state are zero-emission by 2035**.
- The growth of electric vehicles must be accompanied by **investments in electric vehicle charging stations** to make driving these more efficient and climate-friendly vehicles as convenient as gas-running cars and trucks. Doing so will create thousands of jobs.
- The **power sector** must undergo significant changes to in the next 20 years not generate any carbon pollution and reduce our reliance on foreign energy (especially from adversarial nations) by producing more American-made clean energy.
- Cleaning up power plants should also be met with **reducing costs in clean energy technologies and electrifying other sectors of our economy**. That includes moving from gas-burning furnaces to electric heat pumps and other innovations to reduce energy use, for instance by making manufacturing more energy-efficient and upgrading insulation in homes to suck up less energy.
- For sectors that are **difficult to decarbonize**, we need to put great effort and resources behind **discovering new technologies** – such as air capture systems to harness carbon dioxide directly out of the air.
- We must drive **utility energy efficiency and spur greater competition** to lower the cost of energy for consumers especially the use of renewable energies like solar and wind power.

- **Agriculture** is the fourth-leading source of greenhouse gas emissions, after electricity, transportation and manufacturing. We need to **improve ranching practices** to use less land while also producing fewer emissions. Tackling climate change will lessen the impact of droughts, fires, flooding and other extreme weather that have destroyed countless farms and crop cycles.
- By reforming farming practices, we can **create new jobs and grow rural economies**. The federal government must incentivize farmers and ranchers to use new technologies that reduce emissions.
- America must swiftly create jobs and invest resources **in cleaning up harmful resource extraction sites** that do nothing for the economy and hurt community health.
- We must also **hold major polluters accountable** in tandem with environmental cleanup acceleration. The federal government can impose fines on polluters that violate federal laws and **redirect those funds to job training and resource development** needed for environmental cleanup across the country.
- In addition to broad energy efficiency standards, the United States must set bold and time-bound **energy standards for all government buildings and large commercial and residential buildings**. An incentive and penalty model could significantly reduce emissions in some of the biggest sources of electricity in the country. We must set **efficiency standards for appliances** as well.
- The next president must immediately **rejoin the Paris Climate Accord** to fight this global challenge with our global allies. The next president should encourage a **reassessment of the standards as outlined in 2015** based on new developments in research and the ever-increasing threat. Ultimately, we must remain **below 1.5 degrees Celsius of global warming**.
- The United States should again be a **leader on fighting climate change** and encouraging other countries to do so. When countries in the Paris Agreement are not meeting their standards or are cheating the system, the U.S. should take strong positions to disincentivize such behavior.
- Under coordination of the climate secretary and executive office, there must be **procedures in place and regular reporting requirements on the impact of climate change on U.S. national security**, including on our military bases around the world.
- Humans are decimating wildlife and harming biodiversity, which accelerates climate change. The United States must **protect its public land, restore the Endangered Species Act**, protect wildlife and **disincentivize overhunting and overfishing**.
- Policymakers should revisit what works and what doesn't work with market-based approaches like a **carbon tax** to potentially **couple with the aforementioned approaches** of investment and economic development as well as setting goals and legal standards.
- The U.S. should learn from global best practices and have a serious debate on **ending offshore drilling and on public lands**.
- We must make significant investments in **research and development** to continue building smart infrastructure, discover new green technologies, reduce our carbon footprint and decarbonize areas that otherwise seem impossible with new innovations.

- Public companies and government agencies must **disclose climate-related risks** in all new projects, as well as business operations.
- While we must confront the challenges of climate change, we must seize on the opportunity to build a better, safer, healthier future for all Americans. **The federal government must be honest in its communications** about the risks and opportunities related to climate change.
- With that, the Department of Education should **evaluate curricula in the states around climate change and make recommendations** to ensure that what is taught in schools is aligned with the overwhelming majority of scientists and in-line with peer-reviewed literature.
- The **Congress must use its full oversight powers** to investigate and shed light on the reported abuse and self-dealing at the EPA during the Trump administration. Bad actors must be held accountable, and anti-corruption measures must be put into law.
- We must **protect our wildlife and natural resources** on all federal lands and waters.
- Finally, we must develop and implement carbon **capture and sequestration technology** to permanently store greenhouse gases and **develop advanced nuclear energy** to remove risks associated with conventional nuclear.

Achieving Environmental Justice

Americans are facing a devastating intersection of challenges – the COVID-19 pandemic, job loss, health impacts and attacks on health care, and an impending climate catastrophe. When these challenges interplay with the injustices committed against Black and Brown communities every day and the structural determinants that have left communities of color behind, they are revealed painfully as systemic issues. We must commit to a bold, environmental justice agenda that puts equity at the forefront for BIPOC communities. Here is what those solutions might look like:

- People of color are disproportionately impacted by toxic air and air pollution. We must tackle climate change head-on to reduce air pollution and make sure every American can breathe **clean air**.
- We must restore, revitalize, and modernize our water infrastructure to make sure that every American has **clean water** to drink from their taps at home. We must ensure that our water infrastructure can stand up to future impacts from climate change.
- America must immediately **get lead out of drinking water** in homes. Schools and daycare centers.
- Water should never be unaffordable for any American. We can make **water bills affordable** for low-income Americans through targeted revolving loan funds.
- The congress must impose strict standards and **maximum contaminant levels where relevant on harmful pollutants and toxins in our water systems**, including PFAS and other chemicals that disproportionately impact communities of color. There must be **harsh penalties** imposed on polluters that are in violation of these limits.

- Under the newly formed Climate Department, there must be a **division with the sole focus on environmental justice**. This division should ensure that all U.S. climate policy is just and equitable and should work closely with the Department of Justice to hold bad actors accountable and ensure equal protection under the law.
- The Environmental Protection Agency must **re-commit to civil rights** and should publish **annual reports and recommendations** around climate injustices and the furtherance of policies and practices to promote environmental justice.
- The federal government should issue a **robust assessment of how past climate disasters, from Hurricane Katrina to more recent tragedies, have disproportionately impacted communities of color**. Recommendations should include how to respond to future extreme weather events and climate disaster with equitable first response and disbursement of resources.
- Every state should require that communities are **notified of environmental risks** and threats of new government and public projects.
- We **must understand through a needs assessment and immediately rectify climate injustices against indigenous communities** and protect the over one million American Indians and Alaska Natives that live on or near reservations or native land. The federal government must hear the demands of tribal nations and resolve climate inequity facing their communities expeditiously.
- The U.S Department of Agriculture has a long and unfortunate history of discriminating against Black farmers. We **can erase these inequities by establishing a public land trust for Black farmers** and other disadvantaged communities starting out and expand technical assistance to farmers of color. Congress must exercise its oversight authority of the USDA to ensure these measures happen.
- We must commit to **retraining working-class Americans** who spent their careers in coal mines and power plants for clean energy jobs for the future.
- Our country must make efforts to establish a **more diverse, equitable and inclusive workforce** that reflects the people of this great nation through expanded **job training for historically marginalized communities**.
- We must **make capital accessible** for minority- and women-owned small businesses in communities impacted by environmental injustices.
- Far too many working- and middle-class Americans are forced to endure long commute times because housing is unaffordable near their workplaces. The U.S. must form **regional planning councils** to design **smart transportation hubs** that reduce the reliance on automobile emissions and reduce commute times, which will cut emissions and allow for more leisure time for Americans that often don't have it.
- Moreover, we must vastly **expand affordable housing policies** to build millions of climate-safe affordable homes near public transit hubs, so every American has an opportunity to live safely and in healthy homes.
- When polluters and bad actors are held accountable, **those impacted and the communities they represent must have a seat at the table** when remediation and reinvestment decisions are made.

- Communities of color must be the **primary beneficiaries of funds and programs aimed at eliminating legacy pollution** and remediating lead in homes, schools, businesses, childcare centers and more.
- Finally, we must commit to the principles in the **THRIVE agenda** – Transform, Heal, and Renew by Investing in a Vibrant Economy – to boldly revive our economy and grow it so every American has a fair shot, improve our healthcare system and empower our government to enact solutions that rise up to the challenges we face during our climate crisis.

Conclusion

The events of 2020 so far have driven the point home perhaps more clearly than ever: The planet is under siege by global warming and cascading extreme weather events, the growth of displaced communities, a water crisis, and a global pandemic that intersects with climate change.

We need concerted, coordinated, and strong action on climate change and environmental justice now. The proposals outlined herein are by no means exhaustive, but they can start to lay the blueprint of the most pressing areas lawmakers should address to heal the ailing planet and improve the health and sustainability of our communities. *Defeating Climate Change and Building a More Sustainable Future* is a vital and existential set of policies for the **Compact for the American Future**.

Tackling climate change, improving [Healthcare for the 21st Century](#), strengthening [An Economy that Works for all Americans](#), [Building America's Infrastructure](#), and [Building for the Digital Future](#) will set us on a path for a more just, equitable and prosperous future for all.