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What Can Obama Do about Climate Change?

Pres. Obama seemed to signal in his inaugural address that climate change would become a greater priority in his second term, but his goals remain unclear

By Evan Lehmann and ClimateWire | Tuesday, January 22, 2013 | 10 comments

Climate change appears to have climbed to the summit of policy promises yesterday when President Obama vowed in his second inaugural address to confront carbon emissions, because anything less would "betray our children."

He lingered on the issue in a speech filled with snap references to national priorities, devoting more time to the interwoven policies of climate, energy and environmental hazards than to war, deficits and immigration. It was a promise for action that stood in dramatic contrast to his near-silence on the politically difficult issue in the months preceding the November election.

"We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations," Obama said to cheers. "Some may still deny the overwhelming judgment of science, but none can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires, and crippling drought, and more powerful storms."

The address captured what some advocates had hoped to hear from Obama following the bruising impacts of widespread disasters last year, including a drought that sizzled 60 percent of the nation and damages from Superstorm Sandy exceeding \$50 billion. Last year was the warmest on record in the United States, which registered 90 percent of the world's insured losses from disasters.

If advocates doubted the president's strategy before, those concerns seem to have dissolved with his curtain-raising speech.

"President Obama's clarion call to action on the threat of climate change leaves no doubt this will be a priority in his second term," Alden Meyer, policy director for the Union of Concerned Scientists, said in a statement. He added that it will take a "sustained campaign" to establish policies that reduce emissions.

Now the question turns to what Obama can accomplish. His climate priorities are unknown and his address yesterday failed to set out his goals, but that could come later in his State of the Union address.

Marching orders for a revised Cabinet

Still, the speech stands to set a tone for a largely reconstructed Cabinet with new leaders at the departments of State, Interior, Treasury



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and Defense; in U.S. EPA; and perhaps at the Energy Department all taking cues from Obama's muscular second-term entrance.

Since the election, he has repeatedly placed climate change among his top three or four priorities. But it's unclear whether there is enough political energy, and time, to achieve every goal, especially if heavy doses of political capital are expended on, say, pursuing immigration legislation or deficit reduction. Climate advocates learned that lesson during the first term with health care.

"In the end, what's going to count is what happens during those [next] four years, not what he says" in the address, Eileen Claussen, president of the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, said before the speech. "We're starting off really partisan here. The fiscal stuff is not going to end in two months or three months. It's going to go on for a long time. I'm sure they're going to try to do gun control and immigration while it's going on. The question then is, is how much energy is left" for climate legislation?

She suspects that the bulk of progress will occur in the regulatory arena, not the legislative one.

EPA has already proposed rules to limit the emission of carbon dioxide by new power plants to 1,000 pounds per megawatt-hour, a level likely limiting the construction of future coal-fired plants. The rule is expected to be completed this year. It is less clear whether Obama will reduce emissions from other sectors, like industry and transportation.

"The path towards sustainable energy sources will be long and sometimes difficult," Obama said yesterday. "But America cannot resist this transition; we must lead it. We cannot cede to other nations the technology that will power new jobs and new industries -- we must claim its promise. That is how we will maintain our economic vitality and our national treasure -- our forests and waterways; our croplands and snow-capped peaks. That is how we will preserve our planet, commanded to our care by God."

The speech was met by opposition from elements of the energy sector for its potential impact on employment and electricity rates.

"The president missed the opportunity to remind listeners that climate change is an international phenomenon which will require international solutions," Scott Segal, who represents energy companies on behalf of Bracewell & Giuliani, said in a statement. "Indeed, inflexible national policies restrain our economy without delivering promised solutions."

Obama's first term was memorable for its efforts to address climate change. It had a near-miss for capping carbon emissions after the House passed the "American Clean Energy and Security Act" by a narrow vote of 219-212 in June 2009, only to see it dissolve in the Senate controlled by Democrats a year later.

His administration delivered the strongest increases in fuel efficiency standards for passenger cars in decades with promises to cut carbon emissions by 6 billion metric tons by 2025. And EPA under his watch is poised to regulate new, but not existing, power plants.

Window for rapid emissions reduction may be closing

Obama begins his second term one week after a federal advisory committee of 60 climate experts issued a draft report that warns of accelerating global warming. It cautions that the United States has not done enough to avoid rapid increases in carbon dioxide contributing to rising sea levels, intensifying heat waves and storms, damaging droughts and other impacts.

The draft report by the U.S. Global Change Research Program says it is likely the world will forfeit its ability to meet "rapid emission reduction" scenarios needed to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations "within a few years."

That is because human activities going back 150 years have emitted long-lasting carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, meaning that sharp reductions in future emissions are needed to avoid harmful climatic impacts.

"Stabilizing or reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations, therefore, requires very deep reductions in future emissions to compensate for past emissions that are still circulating in the Earth system," the draft report says.


Obama has increased his urgency on the climate since his first inaugural speech, when he warned of the "specter of a warming planet" but did not mention "climate change" or endorse aggressive action to address it.

"It's clear that we cannot dither anymore," Larry Schweiger, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation, said in an interview. "We've been dithering for years knowing this problem is before us. And the president has an opportunity now to address this problem while Hurricane Sandy is fresh in our minds."

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