

Changing Climate Change before It Changes Us

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U.S. President Barack Obama will speak on Tuesday to world leaders on climate change during a special U.N. summit in New York on the eve of the 64th session of the U.N. General Assembly.

The nations of the world are working hard right now to negotiate a new international agreement to combat climate change. And Belgians and Americans are standing as partners with the citizens of the world to secure a safer and more prosperous planet for our children.

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing our world today. Already its impacts are apparent and consequences severe. Arctic sea ice is disappearing faster than expected. The Greenland Ice Sheet is shrinking. Sea levels threaten to rise higher than previously anticipated. And water supplies are increasingly at risk from both melting glaciers and extreme climate events, such as droughts and floods. These changes threaten not only our environment, but also our security and stability.

Science sends a simple and stark message: all countries must work together to combat climate change before it changes us. The time for action is now. This time, we cannot afford to get it wrong. President Obama recognizes that the United States must be a leader in the global effort to combat climate change. We have a responsibility as the world's largest historic emitter of greenhouse gases. We know that without U.S. emissions reductions no solution to climate change is possible. We are committed to work as partners to build a 21st century clean energy economy.

For the United States, this clarion call represents a new direction. The President called on the U.S. Congress to develop comprehensive clean energy legislation to cut emissions 14 percent from 2005 levels by 2020 and 83 percent by 2050. A bill has passed the House of Representatives and is making its way through Congress. The President's economic stimulus package includes over \$80 billion for clean energy. And recently instituted vehicle standards will increase fuel economy and reduce emissions.

Together the EU and U.S. are taking a huge step forward. From an environmental perspective, the EU and U.S. climate packages are comparable and lead to emissions reductions that are consistent with the science. The challenge that unites us therefore is far greater than any negligible difference that divides us.

But together we must also prevent unchecked emissions growth among key emerging economies. To preserve a safe and livable planet, all major emitting nations have to join together to take strong action. There is no other way to contain climate change – the International Energy Agency estimates 97 percent of future emissions growth will come from the developing world. The U.S. is pursuing a global strategy to combat climate change through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiating process, the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate and key bilateral relationships.

To achieve a strong international agreement and meet the climate challenge all countries must be fully engaged. Developed countries need to reduce their emissions substantially by 2020 on an absolute basis, compared to a 2005 or 1990 baseline. Major developing nations must take actions that will substantially reduce their emissions by 2020 on a relative basis, compared to their so-called "business as usual" path. Other developing countries should focus on preparing low-carbon growth plans – with financial and technical assistance where needed – to guide their longer-term development path. It is important to ensure that a new agreement will not require developing countries to take steps that would stifle their capacity to develop and grow.

Ultimately, a climate change agreement must be about not only limiting carbon emissions but about providing a pathway for sustainable development. Clean energy development is the only sustainable way forward. To facilitate this path, countries with advanced capabilities must stand ready to develop and disseminate technologies to countries in need. If we work together, the effort to build a clean energy global economy can provide significant opportunity, driving investment, economic growth and job creation around the world.

In Belgium, we know how seriously the federal and regional governments are treating the related issues of climate change, energy and the environment. We see how the Belgian business sector is taking to heart the challenges and opportunities in "green" technologies to run their affairs more efficiently. We see Belgium's leadership in raising environmental consciousness in the example of its Princess Elisabeth 'zero-emission' research station at the South Pole, powered by wind and solar energy. Opportunities exist to promote even greater cooperation in business, education and government between the United States and Belgium. Our chance is now. There is no time to waste.

The U.S. is clear in its intent to secure a strong international agreement, and I am confident that together we can meet the climate change challenge.