

July 8, 2021

Open Letter to the Biden Administration

We are the Medical Society Consortium on Climate & Health, a group founded in 2017 to represent America's doctors' commitment to acting on climate change. Over the past four years, our seven founding member societies were joined by 25 others, and our member societies now represent more than 60% of practicing physicians in the US. Dozens of other important health organizations – including the American Lung Association, American Heart Association and American Cancer Society – have joined forces with us to educate Americans about the health harms of climate change, and to help America implement equitable climate and health solutions. We are committed to working with government officials to reduce emissions of heat-trapping pollution, promote research on effective solutions, and strengthen America's public health infrastructure with the aim of protecting human health from climate change.

We applaud and strongly support the ambitious pledge that President Biden recently made as America's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Climate Agreement. Achieving this goal – an economy-wide reduction in our nation's net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 50 percent (below 2005 levels) by the end of 2030 – will have important health benefits for everyone in America as a result of reductions in air and water pollution.

Today, however, the Global Climate and Health Alliance (GCHA) issued a scorecard that rated our nation's NDC in terms of its stated commitment to protecting and promoting human health. On the grading criteria used by GCHA our nation scored only 40%, which, sadly, is a failing grade. The grade was based on our NDC's lack of depth and emphasis in articulating the need to respond to climate change as both an urgent public health crisis and a remarkable public health opportunity.

Why is articulating the centrality of health in America's response to the climate crisis so important? We see two reasons. The first is that the all-of-government response President Biden has pledged to use in cutting America's emission of heat-trapping pollution in half over the next decade can – and we argue should – be used to protect and promote the health of the American people, and advance climate and health equity, to the fullest extent possible. Many important health gains will accrue as a by-product of all successful efforts to decarbonize the American economy, but unless health and equity are central considerations in America's decarbonization policies and programs, health gains won't be fully realized, and equity gains may not occur at all. The second important reason is that framing America's race to decarbonize around health and equity benefits will be the most effective way to marshal the public support necessary to achieve our ambitious goals.

President Biden’s Executive Orders on January 20 and January 27 represent a promising start toward engaging our health resources and expertise in our climate response. Galvanizing the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), our largest executive branch agency, is a critical step. Earlier this year, we and many other respected health organizations issued a set of [detailed recommendations](#) that, if enacted, will empower DHHS to participate fully in America’s all-of-government response to the climate crisis. An activated DHHS can: expand our knowledge of how climate, health and equity are intertwined and what we can do to protect all three; spur our health system to greatly reduce its large carbon footprint; help frontline communities protect themselves from the health harms of climate change; and educate the public and policymakers about both the health costs of inaction and health benefits of climate solutions. This last point is particularly important because quantifying the economic costs of inaction, and the economic benefits of climate action, will strengthen the case that investments in climate solutions will rapidly pay for themselves in health and other costs averted.

Beyond creating a central role for health in developing, evaluating, and prioritizing climate solutions, we urge the Biden Administration to make health a focal point in conveying the stakes of its ambitious climate change agenda to the American public. As health professionals, we feel that every nation has an obligation to educate its people about the ways in which climate change is already harming health, and to explain in human terms the potential “existential threat” over the longer-term. But that is only half of the story.

The enormous health benefits of equitable climate solutions – like clean energy, safe biking paths and sidewalks, reliable public transportation, electric vehicles, urban and suburban reforestation, and sustainable agriculture – are the other half of the story. Importantly, these health benefits from climate solutions begin almost immediately, and are experienced locally in the communities that implement them.

Research has shown that telling the positive side of the climate, health and equity solutions story is even more important than explaining the health harms and risks of climate change. Americans are inspired by the idea of building back better and are motivated to support solutions that will protect the health and wellbeing of their loved ones and their broader community.

By framing America’s response, including our NDC, in accordance with this reality – that addressing climate change is first and foremost about protecting and advancing human health in equitable ways – the Administration will help all Americans understand the full and immediate relevance of the task before us. The credible promise of dramatic, immediate health benefits from equitable climate and health solutions is just what the doctor ordered for a country emerging from the grip of a pandemic. We believe it is the key to strengthening public will for the necessary transformations to rise to the challenge of the climate crisis, and build back better.

America’s doctors stand ready to help.