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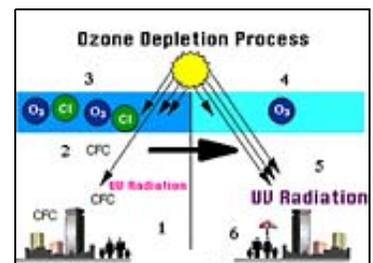
The current debate over global warming in the United States focuses on the question of whether or not the United States should begin to take action to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases released by the country's industries. On the one hand, nearly all atmospheric scientists and environmentalists agree that increasing levels of greenhouse gases will cause significant and perhaps dramatic changes in Earth's climate over the next few decades or so. The call for action now to lessen the effects of those changes is led by traditional environmental organizations such as the Environmental Defense Fund, National Resources Defense Council, and the Sierra Club. On the other hand, most industrial organizations and the federal government argue that it is too early to take action on greenhouse gas emissions. Organizations like the Competitive Enterprise Institute and some agencies of the federal government suggest that research about global warming is still ambiguous and that it would be a mistake to force industry to make expensive changes in the way they do business based on flimsy or inaccurate scientific information.



The key issue in the global warming debate in the United States is economics. In order to meet the conditions of the Kyoto Protocol, the United States would have to reduce its emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases by 7 percent from 1990 emissions levels, to be achieved between the years 2008 and 2012. In a June 2001 press conference, President George W. Bush outlined his administration's position on this point. "Kyoto is, in many ways, unrealistic. . . . For America, complying with those mandates would have a negative economic impact, with layoffs of workers and price increases for consumers. And when you evaluate all these flaws, most reasonable people will understand that it's not sound public policy." In other words, meeting the requirements of the Kyoto Protocol would be too damaging to the American economy. Bush's critics point out that reducing greenhouse gas emissions will not necessarily place an economic burden on the country. They point to new technologies that can produce greater energy efficiency without increasing industrial costs or consumer prices.

Each year that passes seems to produce additional support for global warming theories. For example, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announced in early 2006 that 2005 had been the warmest year ever recorded in human history. That news did not change the position of either proponents or opponents of efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the United States. In the Bush administration, for example, Philip A. Cooney, chief of staff for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, made extensive revisions in government scientific reports on global warming, raising doubts about the connections between greenhouse gases and global warming. Cooney had previously been a lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute.

At the same time, some of those who are concerned about the problem of global warming in the United States have decided to take actions that do not require federal approval. For example, the State of California's Air Resources Board has ordered automakers to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent in the period between 2009 and 2016. Also, the California Public Utilities Commission has directed private utility companies to include a calculation of greenhouse gas emissions into their choices of suppliers of electrical energy. Other states and regions are pursuing similar programs. In the Northeast, for example, nine states have banded together to create the Regional Greenhouse Gas



Initiative, designed to develop requirements for emissions from the region's electric power plants.

The Bush administration acknowledged for the first time in July 2005 that anthropogenic carbon dioxide is responsible for global warming. At the same time, the president decided not to take any action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and, instead, called for further scientific research on the effects of global warming. Critics of the president's position point out that the world is approaching a point of no return, after which time actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will be too late to prevent widespread and dramatic climate changes and the social disruptions they are likely to produce. The general public, however, seems conflicted about global warming. An ABC News Poll conducted in March 2006 found that 85% of those interviewed thought that global warming was "probably happening," but only half of those respondents thought that global warming was "very" or "extremely" important to them personally. Almost two-thirds also believed that scientists were not sure about global warming.

A 2009 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press showed that public perception of global warming as a serious problem was declining among people of all political persuasions. In September 2009, President Barack Obama said if the international community did not act quickly to deal with climate change "we risk consigning future generations to an irreversible catastrophe. . . . The security and stability of each nation and all peoples—our prosperity, our health, and our safety—are in jeopardy, and the time we have to reverse this tide is running out."

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Further Reading

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