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Obama and climate

President must tie action to words

"We, the people, still believe that our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to all posterity. We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations." — President Barack Obama, inaugural address, Jan. 21

Stirring words, indeed. Words for our time that suitably frame the magnitude of the challenge. These same words, though, must be accompanied by bold and sustained action, or, with each tick of the climate clock, they will prove utterly meaningless.

We have little doubt that President Obama meant every one of the 160 words in his inaugural address that he devoted to the developing threat of climate catastrophe posed by human reliance on energy from fossil fuels.

However, as a second-term president, Obama is burdened with a recalcitrant Congress focused on making the United States energy independent by 2020, a goal that may help to sustain the economy but prolong the country's carbon addiction.

Congress has been unwilling to buck industry and place a cap on carbon emissions. Moreover, an abundance of natural gas that is driving down energy costs serves to blunt public pressure to curb the emissions that are causing the planet to warm much faster than scientists had thought likely.

Indeed, what were once predictions of climate-related disasters are already playing out for all to see. "Some may still deny the overwhelming judgment of science," Obama pointed out, "but none can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires, and crippling drought, and more powerful storms."

The president, in his first term, was not idle. Fuel-efficiency standards are mandated to rise to 54 miles per gallon by 2025, the Environmental Protection Agency is now applying the Clean Air Act to carbon dioxide, and nearly \$100 billion in stimulus funds went toward development of clean energy.

But much more is required, and Congress must be on board if the country is to meet Obama's modest 2020 target for reducing carbon emissions by 17 percent, and 80 percent by 2050. For that to happen, a carbon tax is vital.

It is also essential that the United States assume a leadership role in reviving international climate talks aimed at a global strategy for arresting the rise in carbon dioxide levels that, if unchecked, will overwhelm future generations.

With his call to action, the president has taken an encouraging step that will require many more from him and from all Americans.

There is, quite literally, no time to waste.

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