



**Health and Medical
Organizations Call
for Immediate Action
to Protect Our Nation's
Health in the Face of
the Climate Health
Emergency**

Health and medical experts agree that climate change is a health emergency – one of the greatest threats to human health that America has ever faced. Our nation’s health professionals are witnessing the health harms of climate change now, and warning us of the growing impacts on our collective well-being, and the strength of our health systems and our economy, if we fail to take urgent action.

The health and economic devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the perils of ignoring science and health expertise. Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic must be the first health priority for the new Administration. But to avoid being caught flat-footed in the face of growing climate health threats, we must also act now to respond to the climate health emergency.

We represent health professionals and health organizations working every day to ensure the health and well-being of people and communities

nationwide. Despite the health devastation we experienced over the past year, we remain optimistic about the future. We know that good solutions are available – solutions that provide unparalleled opportunities to simultaneously achieve immediate and significant health benefits, strengthen our economy, build racial and environmental equity, and achieve our climate goals.

As the new Administration confronts the interconnected crises of COVID-19, racial injustice, climate change, and economic recovery, it is critical that health and health equity are central organizing principles for “building back better.”

The investments we make today will determine the health of our nation for decades to come. Below we offer a set of recommendations for a whole of government approach to embed health and equity in ambitious climate action.

Nine key priorities for promoting health and equity in climate action

1. Declare the climate crisis a health emergency.
2. Make health and health equity central to U.S. climate policy.
3. Build U.S. leadership worldwide on climate change and health.
4. Restore science and scientific integrity in government.
5. Make environmental justice a top priority for climate action.
6. Take immediate steps to rescind regulations harmful to health and climate.
7. Strengthen U.S. health systems to protect and promote health the era of climate change.
8. Build community climate and health resilience.
9. Integrate health and health equity in all climate policies and investments across the whole of government.

We represent physicians, nurses, health workers, public health professionals, voluntary health organizations, and hospitals and health care systems across the U.S. Our organizations work every day to ensure the well-being of communities nationwide. We have dedicated our lives to improving the health of our patients and communities. We have stepped up to confront the COVID-19 crisis. Now we call for urgent action to address the climate health emergency.

Health and medical experts agree – climate change is one of the greatest threats to human health and societal well-being that America has ever faced. Climate impacts – from hurricanes and wildfires to sea level rise and drought – are affecting the health and safety of millions of people in the U.S., and threatening the air, water, food, and shelter we depend on for our survival. The health impacts of climate change and climate pollution also damage our economy, costing tens of billions of dollars in health care costs each year. The toll on our health and economy continues to rise as we delay action.

Climate change is worsening stark and persistent health inequities. Children and pregnant women, people with low wealth, older adults, people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, communities of color, Indigenous people and tribal communities, immigrants, the unsheltered, outdoor workers, and communities affected by a history of disinvestment and systemic racism are disproportionately harmed by climate pollution and climate change.

The climate health emergency and COVID-19 are interconnected threats. Climate change exacerbates the underlying health conditions that put people at greatest risk of COVID-19; for example people living in areas with poor air quality have a higher risk of death from COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic is stretching our health infrastructure – complicating our response to climate disasters and deepening inequities. The COVID-19 crisis shows us the risks of ignoring science and delaying action. Health experts and front-line health workers are warning us that climate health harms are dangerously accelerating. We

must take these warnings seriously and mount a robust response to the climate health emergency even as we urgently confront the pandemic.

Climate action is one of our greatest opportunities to protect and promote health and redress inequity. Because the root causes of climate change and health inequities are often the same, win-win policies can move us towards safe climate goals, improve health for millions of people, save hundreds of thousands of lives, and significantly reduce health inequities and health-care costs. We must intentionally design climate policies and target climate investments to attain these health and equity benefits.

People across our nation want clean air, clean water, and healthy places for their children to live, learn and play. Drawing the connection between climate action and improved health for our families and our communities is the best way to build the public support and political will needed to achieve an ambitious climate policy agenda. Health professionals are among the most trusted voices in America and are adding their voices to the call for climate health action in unprecedented numbers.

The recommendations below offer a path for bold climate action that protects health and health equity now and for generations to come. As the new Administration considers the best response to the urgent interlocking challenges we face – COVID-19, economic recovery, racial justice, and climate change – we urge you to explicitly center health and health equity. Our recommendations provide an approach to doing so, and build on, complement, and align with the commitments of President-elect Biden and Vice President-Elect Harris and the recommendations of many others (see full list of resources at www.climatehealthaction.org).

As health professionals, we stand ready to work with the Administration to support policies that protect our health and climate, and to use our voice to bring our nation together to address the climate crisis. Together, we can build a healthier, more equitable and more prosperous future for all.

A more detailed set of policy recommendations is forthcoming.

Priority Actions for Climate, Health, and Equity

1. DECLARE THE CLIMATE CRISIS A HEALTH EMERGENCY

A declaration of a Climate Emergency should include a declaration that the climate crisis is both a health emergency and a health opportunity and should authorize the Department of Health and Human Services to launch a broad-based initiative to protect and promote health in the era of climate change.

2. MAKE HEALTH AND HEALTH EQUITY CENTRAL TO U.S. CLIMATE POLICY

Embedding health in climate policymaking and programs through a Health in All Policies approach will foster a wiser use of federal investments to simultaneously address the climate crisis and improve health.

- **Fully integrate health agencies and health staff in all climate leadership and initiatives.** The Secretary of Health and Human Services should sit on the proposed White House National Climate Council. Chief Climate and Health Equity Officer positions should be established in key agencies, and senior climate health policy and environmental justice advisors added to the staff of the National Climate Council, Council on Environmental Quality, Office of Science and Technology Policy, National Security Council, and proposed Interagency Climate Equity Taskforce.
- **Ensure a full accounting of the health, health equity, and environmental justice risks and benefits of all proposed climate policies and investments.** The Office of Science and Technology Policy, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Office of Management and Budget should coordinate efforts to develop tools and methodologies to fully assess health risks and benefits, including revised methodology to assess the social cost of carbon to account for health impacts and costs.
- **Build public awareness and support for climate health action.** The Surgeon General

should issue a Call to Action on the Climate and Health Emergency and launch a broad public information campaign on climate change and health.

3. BUILD U.S. LEADERSHIP WORLDWIDE ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH

U.S. leadership and resources are needed to foster the global collaboration that is vital to protecting the health of the American people and economy in the face of the climate health emergency.

- **Prioritize health and equity in a declaration to rejoin the Paris Agreement.** The Department of Health and Human Services should be a full participant in negotiations and policy-making under the Paris Agreement, including in development of the U.S. Nationally Determined Contribution. All convenings ahead of UNFCCC meetings should include Health Ministers and a health track that explicitly addresses issues of health.
- **Prioritize specific financial and expert support for the World Health Organization's Climate and Health Programme** in the commitment to rejoin the WHO.
- **Commit fair-share financing for global climate action.** Re-commit to investment in the Green Climate Fund, increase funding to USAID for climate and health activities, and expand support to low- and middle-income countries for emissions reductions and adaptation efforts.
- **Align immigration policy to include climate migration.** Issue a cross-agency directive to develop a response to the growing number of climate-displaced people and lead an effort to incorporate climate displacement into the international definition of refugee.
- **Commit to join and/or ratify key international climate and environmental agreements and alliances.**

4. RESTORE SCIENCE AND SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY IN GOVERNMENT

Science remains the best tool we have to understand the world around us and enable informed decisions. The new Administration must restore scientific integrity to government policymaking and protect the independence of government scientists and science advisors.

- **Withdraw or repeal rules that weaken scientific integrity in decision-making** including the Strengthening Transparency in Regulatory Science rule and the Increasing Consistency in Considering Benefits and Costs in the Clean Air Act Rulemaking rule.
- **Rescind directives that restrict independent scientific Federal Advisory Committees**, and issue directives that require the appointment of qualified experts, improved transparency, and no conflicts of interests on these Committees.
- **Restore budget cuts for federal scientific agencies**, rebuild the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and restore eliminated scientist positions across the whole of government.

5. MAKE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE A TOP PRIORITY FOR CLIMATE ACTION

To achieve the full health benefits of climate action, it is critical to design policies that prioritize environmental and social justice, build on local knowledge, and empower community leadership and resilience.

- **Issue an Environmental Justice Executive Order that strengthens EO 12898 “Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations.”**
- **Commit that 40% of economic recovery, infrastructure, and clean energy investments benefit vulnerable and impacted Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and low-wealth communities.** The Council on Environmental Quality, Office of Science and Technology Policy, and Health and Human Services should coordinate to create a Climate and Health Equity Screening Tool that enables such targeted investments.

- **Build political power in climate vulnerable, BIPOC, and frontline communities.** Provide opportunities and resources to support the full and meaningful participation of Indigenous people and tribal nations, and organizations representing BIPOC, low-wealth, and health and environmental justice communities in climate policy making.

6. TAKE IMMEDIATE STEPS TO RESCIND REGULATIONS HARMFUL TO HEALTH AND CLIMATE

Federal agencies should move to inventory, and withdraw or repeal rules and regulations that harm human health and undermine climate action, and act to reinstate and restore rules that protect health, prioritizing those that center health equity, environmental justice and climate mitigation. Priority regulatory actions include:

- Repeal the Affordable Clean Energy rule
- Reinstate and strengthen New Source Review under the Clean Air Act
- Restore the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards findings
- Restore California’s waiver for stronger vehicle pollution under the Clean Air Act
- Reinstate Executive Order 13653, “Preparing the United States for the Impacts of Climate Change”

7. STRENGTHEN U.S. HEALTH SYSTEMS TO PROTECT AND PROMOTE HEALTH IN THE ERA OF CLIMATE CHANGE

While pandemic response must be the most urgent health priority for the new Administration, we must concurrently respond to the climate health emergency. Health actions and investments now must build our resilience to ensure that the nation is not caught flat-footed again in the face of rising climate health threats.

- **Elevate climate and health as a priority for the Department of Health and Human Services and establish an Office of Climate and Health Equity in the Secretary’s office.** Appoint an Assistant Secretary for Climate and Health Equity in HHS to lead a new Office of Climate and Health Equity (OCHE) that develops a 100-day National Climate Health

and Equity Strategic Action Plan, fosters integration of climate across HHS, and coordinates with other agencies to ensure health equity in all climate policy efforts. Appoint senior climate and health staff in the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries for Health, Preparedness and Response, and Global Affairs.

- **Strengthen the U.S. public health infrastructure to respond to climate change.** Expand the current CDC Climate and Health Program through creation of a fully-funded Center on Climate and Health Equity and integration of climate across all CDC programs. Priority actions for this Center should include: (1) implementation of a national climate-health surveillance system; (2) issuance of guidance on the assessment of community vulnerability, health impacts of climate change, and health outcomes of climate action; and (3) translation of research into action to prevent climate health harms and build climate resilience.
- **Expand investments in State, Local, Tribal and Territorial (SLTT) health department climate and health capacity.** Expand funding for programs and public information campaigns that prevent climate-related health harms and build community resilience, including Public Health Emergency Preparedness grants, CDC grants to SLTT for climate-related health inequities, and community grant programs.
- **Build the capacity of health care systems and facilities to prepare for and respond to climate-related extreme weather events.** Issue HHS guidance, expand funding, and update rules and regulations to ensure all health facilities are prepared for current and future climate threats, can continue operations during catastrophic events, and can provide care for vulnerable groups during climate disasters. This should include: (1) Update Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Conditions of Participation, (2) Update the Emergency Preparedness Rule in consultation with the proposed Health Care System Readiness Task Force, (3) Expand the Hospital Preparedness Program to support pre-disaster hospital and health facility resilience projects, (4) Increase funding for the Public Health Service's Ready Reserve Corps, and (5) Support climate preparedness in tribal, territorial, safety net and rural hospitals, the Indian Health Service, and the Veterans Health Administration.
- **Enable health care systems and facilities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.** Develop a national health care decarbonization plan to reduce the health care system's climate footprint in line with a goal of net-zero emissions and an ambitious target date. Align funding, research, and programs to incentivize and enable rapid implementation of this plan.
- **Strengthen capacity to address the mental health impacts of climate change.** Integrate climate impacts on mental health and climate resilience in Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and National Institute on Drug Abuse funded programs and in the National Health Security Strategy. Establish an HHS program on community-based mental health resilience, and fund crisis mental health programs to serve communities and disaster first responders in climate-related disasters.
- **Strengthen U.S. workforce capacity to address the climate health emergency.** Integrate climate education and workforce development at all levels of health professional training and expand training and career pathways in family-sustaining jobs in climate and health for BIPOC and people living in low-wealth communities. Design the proposed U.S. Public Health Job Corps to enable the transition from pandemic response to other public health priorities including climate health resilience and health equity.
- **Expand investments in climate and health research.** Establish a fully funded NIH National Institute of Climate Change and Health. Direct this institute to develop and implement a Climate and Health Research Agenda that prioritizes immediately implementable solutions, and incorporates community engagement, broad dissemination of findings, and translation of research into practice. Expand the remit of relevant health research agencies, including the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, to reflect the climate and environmental sustainability goals of the healthcare sector.

8. BUILD COMMUNITY CLIMATE AND HEALTH RESILIENCE

Communities across the U.S. are experiencing the devastating health impacts of climate-related extreme events. Underinvestment, systemic racism and cumulative environmental insults put some communities at greater risk of harm and with fewer resources to respond.

- **Launch a cross-agency Community Climate Resilience Initiative** to assess climate risks and implement community-based plans to address them, including meaningful community engagement in the design and execution of these initiatives.
- **Streamline access to resources for community resilience** administered by different agencies (e.g., weatherization, cooling, tree-planting)
- **Prioritize economic recovery investments that simultaneously build community climate and health resilience**, including community resilience hubs, parks, green space, tree canopy, and infrastructure to reduce harms from heat, flooding, wildfire, drought, and extreme storms.
- The Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Department of Labor, and the Federal Emergency Management Administration should coordinate an effort to enhance capacity for home and community services providers to serve as de-facto first responders.

9. INTEGRATE HEALTH AND HEALTH EQUITY IN ALL CLIMATE POLICIES AND INVESTMENTS ACROSS THE WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT

Promoting healthy, equitable, and climate resilient communities requires action across all sectors – from agriculture to transportation – that takes into consideration the fundamental drivers of health and well-being. This Health in All Policies paradigm is essential to break down silos in government and optimize policies and investments that achieve multiple wins. The below are priority actions key federal agencies, beyond

the Department of Health and Human Services, should advance to maximize health, health equity, environmental justice, and community resilience in climate policies and investments. A more comprehensive and detailed policy agenda for federal agencies is forthcoming.

A. Department of Agriculture

- **Invest in policies and programs that support diversified and regenerative agricultural practices.** This includes efforts to strengthen small to mid-scale farms and ranches, urban agriculture, and regional food systems, and prevent further consolidation in the agriculture and food sectors. Prioritize support to BIPOC, women, and new farmers.
- **Expand conservation of agricultural lands and natural spaces.**
- **Reduce the health and climate harms of industrial animal production** by strengthening air and water pollution rules for CAFOs and incentivizing healthy soils and carbon sequestration.
- **Expand access to healthy and sustainably produced food.** Establish a Farm to Fork Office and increase funding for Farm to School and other local farm promotion programs to expand access to healthy produce; enhance requirements for school meal and child nutrition programs including meat-free options; and strengthen standards for SNAP retailers.
- **Reduce food waste.** Establish ambitious targets and plans for food waste reduction across government institutions, at farms, and in food systems.
- **Align nutrition education for climate and health.** Align Dietary Guidelines to include climate and environmental sustainability considerations.

B. Department of Education

- **Protect student and teacher health and safety from extreme heat, flooding, wildfire smoke, and pollution** through funding for school infrastructure upgrades and construction standards (e.g., air filtration, cooling).

- **Establish a Council on Environmental Literacy** to integrate environmental and climate literacy in K-12 and undergraduate education and support states in development of climate curricula.

C. Department of Energy

- **Invest in clean, safe, and equitable renewable energy and energy efficiency.** Set a target and blueprint for achieving 100% clean renewable energy for electricity, transportation, and buildings by 2035. Renew and expand financing programs, tax credits, and incentives including investment in a nationwide smart 100% clean electricity grid.
- **Ensure equitable access to renewable energy and energy efficiency, and reduce energy poverty.** Expand investments in the Weatherization Assistance Program, Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program, Low Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program, and USDA Rural Utility services, prioritizing services for and family-sustaining job creation in low-wealth and pollution impacted communities.
- **Implement a plan and timeline for decarbonization of the U.S. economy.** Rapidly phase out subsidies for fossil fuel energy extraction and generation, including tax credits and deductions.

D. Environmental Protection Agency

- **Restore EPA's core mission to protect human health and the environment.** Issue a Secretary's Memo renewing the commitment to use the best scientific evidence to protect the environment and human health, to prioritize the climate crisis, and to address environmental justice and health equity in all actions.
- **Strengthen rules and programs to assure every American breathes clean air.** In addition to repealing the health-harming rules listed above, take immediate steps to enact new rules and regulations protecting our air and climate. Prioritize programs to reduce transportation emissions from cars, trucks and buses; expand electric vehicle use; comprehensively address wildfire smoke; and limit emissions from energy production and other harmful sources such as CAFOs. Initiate NAAQS reviews for particulate matter and ozone and set the strongest science-based standards to protect health.

- **Ensure universal access to clean and affordable drinking water, wastewater infrastructure, and safe recreational waters.** Restore Clean Water Act protections and the Waters of the United States rule. Expand investments in the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund and Clean Water State Revolving Fund. Target investments in water infrastructure, conservation, and efficiency in low-wealth and vulnerable communities.
- **Reduce and mitigate the health harms of fossil fuel energy production.** Replace the Affordable Clean Energy Rule with a rule to rapidly and equitably reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and conventional pollutants from existing and new power plants. Restore limits on methane emissions from new oil and gas operations and establish strong limits on existing sources.
- **Ensure the protection of fence line and front-line communities.** Reestablish an independent Office of Environmental Justice and strengthen the EPA National Environmental Justice Advisory Council. Increase investments and pass regulations to protect environmental justice communities including: (1) Incorporate cumulative impacts into regulatory decisions, (2) Establish buffer zones between sensitive populations and oil and gas infrastructure, (3) Address emissions and toxics exposures harmful for climate and health by reinstating the EPA's Chemical Disaster Rule and establishing protocols with FEMA to conduct immediate monitoring of toxic releases before, during, and after natural disasters.
- **Develop a regulatory plan to rapidly phase out hydrofluorocarbons in line with the Kigali Agreement.**

E. General Services Administration

- **Strengthen federal procurement guidelines to align with climate and environmental sustainability, health, and equity goals.**

F. Department of Homeland Security

- **Federal Emergency Management Agency programs must fully integrate climate, resilience, and equity.** Enhance funding for pre-disaster risk reduction and response to include the full scope of climate risks, and expand funding to local and state agencies to support effective preparedness, warning,

response, and recovery services, and assure the climate-resilience of major critical infrastructure. Develop a comprehensive strategy to ensure that disaster risk reduction, response and recovery efforts meet the needs of people and communities least able to prepare and recover, including through meaningful community engagement in planning processes.

- **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services should revamp immigration policies** to address the climate migrant and refugee crisis, including establishing programs for temporary and permanently displaced persons.

H. Department of Housing and Urban Development

- **Retrofit buildings for energy efficiency, electrification, and weatherization**, prioritizing low-income homes, public housing, schools and community buildings such as libraries. Link these retrofit programs with local workforce development and family-sustaining job creation in low-wealth communities.
- **Integrate climate mitigation and resilience into all HUD guidance and funding**, including zero-pollution building codes, zoning and building code guidance for disaster risk reduction, and integration of urban heat island and flooding resilience strategies.
- **Increase access to affordable housing close to family-sustaining jobs, transit, and health resources.** Increase investments in the expansion of affordable housing (e.g. National Housing Trust Fund, Community Development Financial Institutions Fund, Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers, and Indian Housing Block Grant programs).

I. Department of the Interior

- **Phase out extraction of fossil fuels.** Issue an Executive Order to halt all new fossil fuel lease sales and permits for new fossil fuel infrastructure, phase out existing extraction, and ban fracking on federal lands and waters.
- **Implement, support and incentivize improved forest management in public and private working forests to protect forest**

health and prevent wildfires. Fully engage Indigenous leadership and knowledge in these efforts.

- **Commit to the preservation of public lands for public use and natural carbon sinks.** Reverse rollbacks of land protections, and invest in the backlog of public lands projects and parks maintenance. Increase and make permanent funding for the Land and Wildlife Conservation Fund, and expand funding for parks and green space in park-poor communities and for the U.S. Forest Service urban forestry programs.
- **Increase funding for water resources management, infrastructure maintenance, and protection from flooding, salt-water inundation, and drought.**

J. Department of Justice

- **Investigate and proactively prosecute violations of law by polluters** for environmental and health harms associated with air, water and soil pollution.
- **Ensure active enforcement of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act across all agencies**, focusing on violations that exacerbate environmental injustice.

K. Department of Labor

- **Ensure a just transition for workers and the protection of communities reliant on fossil fuel extraction.** Establish a Just Transition Task Force with the full participation of labor and impacted communities to develop a comprehensive national program to protect the health and economic well-being of workers, families, and communities affected by the transition to a clean energy economy. Reestablish workforce development programs to assist transitioning fossil fuel workers and improve the clean energy workforce pipeline.
- **Strengthen worker safety and health protections.** Issue emergency standards to protect agricultural and other outdoor workers from extreme heat, wildfire smoke, and other climate risks. Resource the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health to address climate-related threats to worker health and safety.

- **Ensure that farmworkers and farmworker communities have access to clean and safe drinking water and affordable healthy housing.**

L. Department of Transportation

- **Align priorities, investments, and policies with U.S. climate goals and make health, safety and equitable transit core goals.** Link transportation funding to climate and health metrics including vehicle mile reduction, emissions and pollution reduction, health and safety, access and affordability, access to family-sustaining jobs and essential services, and equity. Provide updated zoning and road design guidance to states and localities reflecting climate, health and safety priorities. Implement a fix it first approach to infrastructure maintenance and integrate climate resilience in transportation projects.
- **Invest in policies to increase the use of public transit, walking, and biking.** Dramatically expand funding for public transportation, complete streets, and active transportation programs by shifting funding formulas away from highway construction. Implement a strong Complete Streets policy requiring state departments of transportation to consistently plan for the health and safety of all people and equitable implementation of programs in all communities.
- **Support the rapid enhancement of fuel efficiency and electrification.** Issue an Executive Order to require 100% Zero Emission Vehicle procurement by all federal agencies. Fund equitable transportation electrification in cars, public transit, and rail.

As health professionals, it is our professional and moral responsibility to protect and promote the health of all people. Despite the health devastation we as a country experienced over the past year, we remain optimistic about the future. We know that good solutions are available – solutions that provide unparalleled opportunities to solve many of our co-occurring crises all at once. By making health equity a central organizing principle for “building back better” we can achieve immediate and significant health and economic benefits, advance racial and environmental justice, and move towards a stable and healthy climate. We stand ready to join with the new Administration to address the climate health emergency and move the nation toward our vision of healthy people in healthy places on a healthy planet.

Endorsing Organizations

American Public Health Association

Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments

Climate for Health, EcoAmerica

Climate Psychiatry Alliance

Health Care Without Harm

Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health

Medical Students for a Sustainable Future

National Medical Association

Physicians for Social Responsibility

Public Health Institute