

## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE

### AAFP Position

In recognition of the serious adverse health consequences resulting from pollution, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and ozone layer depletion, the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) recommends strong action on all public and private levels to reduce pollution of our land, atmosphere, and water to mitigate the effects of climate change and improve environmental health. The AAFP opposes any federal or state government actions to reduce public access to environmental health research data and supports policies to research and manage toxic environmental exposures. The AAFP will continue to work with other health care organizations to inform the public and policymakers about the harmful health effects of climate change and highlight the immediate and long-term benefits associated with decreased GHG emissions and clean air and water.

The AAFP is a member of the Medical Consortium on Climate and Health, a [coalition](#) of associations representing more than 500,000 medical professionals dedicated to raising awareness about the impacts of climate change on human health. According to the Consortium's 2017 [report](#), two out of three physicians believe climate change is relevant to patient care.

### What is Climate Change?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines climate change as "any significant change in the measures of climate lasting for an extended period of time" and includes major changes in temperature, precipitation, or wind patterns, as well as other effects, that occur over several decades or longer.<sup>1</sup> Temperatures are rising, snow and rainfall patterns are shifting, and more extreme climate events are already happening. Climate change has increased the likelihood of more frequent and severe heat waves, wildfires, intense natural disasters, winter storms, and hurricanes. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, human activities, particularly burning fuels for energy, have been the dominant cause associated with increases in the concentration of carbon and other GHGs.<sup>2</sup>

### Health Impacts of Climate Change

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), climate change, together with other natural and human-made health stressors, influences human health and disease in [numerous ways](#) by intensifying existing threats and creating new ones. Higher temperatures, extreme weather, rising sea levels, and increasing carbon dioxide levels all contribute to a myriad of poor health outcomes, especially for the world's most vulnerable communities. The [health effects](#) of these disruptions include increased respiratory and cardiovascular disease, injuries and premature deaths related to extreme weather events, changes in the prevalence and geographical distribution of food- and water-borne illnesses and infectious diseases, and mental health threats of increased levels of stress, particularly for those with pre-existing mental illnesses and emergency workers.

### Federal Climate Change Policies

In 2015, EPA implemented the Clean Power Plan (CPP), a legal mandate under the Clean Air Act that set state-by-state goals to reduce carbon emissions originating from power plants to achieve a 32

<sup>1</sup> "Climate Change: Basic Information." (2016). U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Web.

<sup>2</sup> Butler C. (2018). "Climate Change, Health and Existential Risks to Civilization." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. Web.

percent sector-wide reduction of emission below 2005 levels by 2030. Following a review by the Trump administration, the EPA replaced the CPP with the Affordable Clean Energy rule in October 2017. According to the EPA's own [estimates](#), this new rule may actually increase GHG emissions and lead to an additional 1,400 deaths per year.<sup>3</sup> The AAFP sent a [letter](#) opposing the decision to replace the CPP, the effects of which would increase the likelihood of negative health outcomes from air pollution, especially amongst vulnerable populations.

The most recent [National Climate Assessment](#) highlights national policy changes to address climate change, including agriculture and forestry programs to increase carbon sequestration, regulations to phase down hydrofluorocarbons, and standards for reducing methane emissions from fossil fuels. Federal agencies are partnering with states to develop tailored guidelines for integrated climate adaptation, land use, and hazard mitigation planning. The federal government has provided resources for the relocation of some communities that have been displaced or are at risk of displacement from coastal areas threatened by sea level rise. The U.S. military now routinely integrates climate risks into its analysis, plans, and programs.

### State Policy Trends

States have been working to advance a wide range of climate change policies for their unique circumstances, regardless of federal action. In 2005, nine Northeastern states created the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative ([RGGI](#)), a cooperative effort to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from the power sector. Additionally, [The Climate Registry](#) (TCR), an organization governed by U.S. states and Canadian provinces and territories, operates voluntary GHG reporting programs globally and assists organizations in measuring, reporting, and verifying the carbon in their operations to manage and reduce it. The Pew Charitable Trust's [Center for Climate and Energy Solutions](#) lists states that have adopted 24 different types of policies to address climate change, with major policy areas noted here:

Climate Change Policy	States
<b>GHG emissions targets – emission reduction levels states set out to achieve by a specified time.</b>	22 states and DC - AZ, CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, HI, IL, MA, MD, ME, MI, MN, NC, NH, NM, NJ, NY, OR, PA, WA, VT
<b>Climate Action Plans – steps that states can take to reduce their contribution to climate change.</b>	33 states and DC - AZ, AK, AR, CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, HI, IA, IL, KY, MA, MD, ME, MI, MN, MO, MT, NC, NH, NM, NJ, NV, NY, OR, PA, SC, UT, VA, VT, WA, WI
<b>Electricity Portfolio Standards – requiring a certain percentage of a utility's electricity to come from renewable or clean energy sources.</b>	28 states and DC – AZ, CA, CO, CT, DE, HI, IA, IL, ME, MD, MI, MN, MO, MT, NC, NH, NJ, NM, NV, NY, OH, OR, PA, RI, TX, VT, WA, WI

### Reducing emissions

Several states have set ambitious goals to transition to clean energy and/or reduce emissions. In March 2019, New Mexico passed the [Energy Transition Act](#) which commits the state to achieving zero-carbon electricity from public utilities by 2045, with renewable energy targets of 50 percent by 2030 and 80 percent by 2040. Maryland enacted [legislation](#) that aims to use 50 percent renewable energy by 2030. Colorado's [Climate Action Plan to Reduce Pollution](#) will reduce statewide GHG pollution emissions by 90 percent by 2050 and directs appropriations accordingly. [Washington](#) state aims to transition to a clean, affordable, and reliable energy future via three targets: no use of coal power by 2025, be 100 percent carbon neutral by 2030, and use 100 percent clean energy by 2045. In June 2019, New York passed the [Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act](#) which promotes aggressive regulations to curtail the emission of GHGs. This act includes challenging goals of reducing emissions to 60 percent of 1990 emissions levels by 2030 and to 15 percent of 1990 emissions levels by 2050.

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<sup>3</sup> Keyes A, Lambert K, Burtraw D, Buonocore J, Levy J, Driscoll C. (2019). "The Affordable Clean Energy Rule and the Impact of Emissions Rebound on Carbon Dioxide and Criteria Air Pollutant Emissions." *Resources of the Future*. Web.