

# Seeking More Presidential Action, Less Rhetoric, on Warming

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**Highlight:** A law professor sees too much foot-dragging in Obama's climate plans.

## Body

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11:23 a.m. | Updated | There's been some worthwhile commentary and analysis since President Obama delivered his global warming speech at Georgetown University yesterday (and a dribble of conventional news coverage). Michael Wara, a law professor at Stanford University, doesn't flunk the president, but in a "Your Dot" contribution offers a tough critique, as if facing a student who keeps making excuses for tardy inadequate work:

Ambition is Not Enough

You and I usually see eye to eye on the complex reality of climate change policy. Today however, I have to disagree with your conclusion that Obama's climate plan is an important and substantive announcement. [For the record, my main plaudits were on the section on cutting exposure to climate hazards.]

Being a teacher, I tend to look at politicians, given all of their constraints, like well intentioned but over-committed students. I always judge students not on what they say they will do but on their track record of delivering high quality work on time.

At this point, five years in, Obama should also be judged by his actions (tightened car emission standards; delayed power plant rules) rather than his words on climate change. This is not necessarily to criticize him, only to recognize that words are cheap and the president has limited political capital to spend on a variety of important priorities. Sixty percent of U.S. emissions come from two sectors - transportation and the power sector. I'll focus on these.

On transportation, the president rightly claims credit for accepting the California proposals on carbon pollution standards for cars, making them nationwide and expanding them. But these moves occurred when the businesses likely to be most strongly opposed were partly owned by the American taxpayer. But his new plan mostly talks about biofuels - about which don't get me started (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

Regarding the transport sector, the most hopeful new technologies we have involve electrification, not biofuels. The president doesn't talk about that, perhaps for good reason but perhaps not. The truth is that if electric cars take off, a vehicle pollution problem just turns into a power plant pollution problem.

So on to power plants, where because of a series of court decisions, and the text of the Clean Air Act, the president has the possibility of making big changes. Here, the plan says nothing concrete beyond setting some deadlines.

\* This is sort of like busy students coming into my office, having blown a deadline for an assignment, saying that this time is different and they'll be sure to get it to me next week. In fact, the situation is exactly like that. The Obama Administration, is under a court imposed settlement to issue these standards, which they have violated; they have issued and then withdrawn draft rules for new power plants after strong pushback from the power sector; and EPA is about to get sued by environmental groups for violating the settlement.

I had hoped for some real sense of substantive policy direction from the president - how he intends to use the Clean Air Act to deal with power plant carbon pollution. I hoped that Obama would lay down a clear marker. Instead, his relative lack of direction allows industry to rest easy with the current situation instead of being part of a push for congressional action on this important problem.

If this were my student, I would ask him to stop making promises and instead to start handing in his papers on time. But I would also recognize that, like my student, the President has other very pressing things to do with his remaining time in office.

- Michael Wara

11:49 a.m. | Updated | John Cronin, a Pace University colleague of mine with a long career in environmental policymaking and campaigns, posted an excellent piece at Earth Desk including these points:

[T]he plan is heavy on executive actions and agency rule making. It is unlikely the House majority will sit quietly for this Obama end run, or the apparent attack on the coal industry and the possible threat to the Keystone XL Pipeline. Expect House hearings when new rules and regulations are promulgated and when or, more accurately, if, the president teeters toward opposing XL.

Administration officials do not always appear at their best under a congressional grilling. Second term presidents have a brief window to affect a meaningful agenda. Most political experts time that at 18 months. Chris Cillizza and Aaron Blake wrote in the Washington Post on the day of Obama's inauguration, "The reality is that a clock started counting down the minute Obama took the oath of office on Sunday, a clock that will likely run out of time in, roughly, July 2014." Perhaps the president will defy the odds, but his climate plan will not be his only priority during the next twelve months. The effectiveness of his limited reserve of political capital in the face of House and industry objections will likely be determined by political realities that have little to do with the rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

11:23 a.m. | Update | The section from the asterisk down is adjusted to fix an editing error on my part.

Obama's Chance for a Fresh Start on a Climate-Smart Energy Quest

Obama's Ambitious Global Warming Action Plan

Obama Previews an Upcoming Global Warming Speech