

Useless hand wringing and empty platitudes in the latest US climate report

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The congressionally mandated Fifth National Climate Assessment was released by the Biden administration Tuesday, the latest in a long line of national and international climate reports that highlight the numerous problems society faces as a result of climate change. The threats to human civilization detailed in the assessment, including but not limited to “accelerating sea level rise, intensifying extreme weather” and “reductions in biodiversity,” have been reported on by multiple agencies and government bodies for several years, continually reaffirming the danger climate change poses to human life.

The dire situation described completely dwarfs the series of implausible proposed remedies. This disparity again underscores the impossibility of combining a scientific approach to resolving climate change with the ongoing existence of capitalism and the dominance of the world economy by the drive for private profits and the division of the world into rival nation-states.

The primary official goal in the fight against climate change, stated in similar terms in virtually all other such reports, is to keep the increase of the global average temperature above the 1850-1900 average, “well below 2°C (3.6°F), and preferably to 1.5°C (2.7°F).” To achieve this, “global CO2 emissions would have to reach net zero by around 2050; global emissions of all greenhouse gases would then have to reach net zero within the following few decades.”

It’s worth stating from the outset that the data presented in the Fifth National Climate Assessment does not support either of these possibilities. The most optimistic outlook, in which carbon dioxide emissions are “Very Low,” has CO2 emissions reach net zero when more of the greenhouse gas is removed from the atmosphere than added by human activity, closer to 2060 than 2050. And the report projects that global temperatures will increase beyond 2 degrees Celsius starting in the 2040s, possibly even the 2030s.

Moreover, current CO2 emissions are nowhere near the levels needed for the “Very Low” scenario. For that to occur, global emissions must by 2100 fall from where they are now, an estimated 37.12 gigatons of CO2 a year, to about half of what they were in 2000, about 14 gigatons. The last time global greenhouse gas emissions were that low, Neil Armstrong walked on the moon.

The current trajectory is more akin to the “High” scenario, which predicts what will happen if CO2 emissions in 2100 are 75 percent greater than what they were in 2000. Under those conditions, global temperatures will increase beyond 2 degrees Celsius in the 2030s, nearly 3 degrees Celsius in the 2040s, and 4 degrees Celsius in the 2060s. In 2023, emissions are already 45 percent greater.

It is of course not impossible to greatly suppress greenhouse gas emissions. Proposals have been made for decades on ways to reorganize the energy, transportation, logistics and agricultural industries to rein in CO2 emissions. A slew of new technologies have been developed, from atmospheric carbon capture to more advanced renewable energy, that make these plans very feasible. In a rational world, such plans would have been implemented when the first warnings of the dangers of greenhouse gas emissions were raised.

In today’s United States, however, solutions are instead limited to the most tepid measures. One example from the report reads, “Mitigation and adaptation activities are advancing from planning stages to deployment in many areas, including improved grid design and workforce training for electrification, building upgrades, and land-use choices.”

From elsewhere in the document, “While adaptation planning and implementation has advanced in the US, most adaptation actions to date have been incremental and small in scale.” And another, “Efforts to adapt to climate change and reduce net greenhouse gas emissions are underway in every US region and have expanded since 2018.”

It’s laughable that such pathetic measures are even highlighted as progress, and not as a colossal failure to respond to the climate crisis for four decades. The astronomer Carl Sagan spoke on the science of the greenhouse effect and the dangers posed by the continued and uncontrolled emission of greenhouse gases to Earth’s climate in testimony before Congress in 1985, specifically, the Senate Environment and Public Works Subcommittee on Hazardous Wastes and Toxic Substances Committee.

At the time, Sagan warned, “if you don’t worry about it now, it’s too late later on.” Thirty-three years later is certainly within the realm of “later on.”

Another striking aspect of the report is that only in 2023 is the

US government finally capable of admitting, “The global warming observed over the industrial era is unequivocally caused by greenhouse gas emissions from human activities—primarily burning fossil fuels. Atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide (CO₂)—the primary greenhouse gas produced by human activities—and other greenhouse gases continue to rise due to ongoing global emissions.”

The fact that climate change is caused by human activity has been known for decades, but is still flatly denied by a large section of the capitalist ruling elite, and virtually the entire Republican Party (and many Democrats). The basic science behind global warming, that higher atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases such as CO₂ will trap more incoming heat from the sun, has been known for more than a century. And even major fossil fuel corporations such as ExxonMobil have admitted to the relationship between CO₂ emissions and global temperature changes since at least the early 1980s.

Yet official policy advanced at a glacial pace and did so only insofar as it did not impinge on the profits of Wall Street. Under the Clinton administration, as temperatures were rising and polar ice caps were melting, no measures, not even token ones such as those stemming from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, were implemented to halt greenhouse gas emissions. Studies and testimony about global warming were actively suppressed during the Bush administration, at the direction of the two Texas oilmen: Bush himself, and his vice president Dick Cheney, previously the CEO of Halliburton Corp., a leading supplier of equipment to the oil companies.

Under Obama, Trump and now Biden, the ongoing initiatives promoting alternative energy, electric vehicles, etc. have been promoted not because of concern over planetary ecology, but because there is now profit to be made from new markets emerging out of “green” technologies.

There is also an immense amount of geostrategic jockeying, particularly sparked by the industrial growth of China. Every US-based climate report makes special mention that China is now the single largest producer of greenhouse gas emissions, while downplaying the fact that the US, UK and European Union combined are responsible for the lion’s share of CO₂ emissions. Ecology has become one more pretext for trade warfare measures against the world’s second largest economy, and even for military conflict.

Nor are such measures directed solely against China. The development of so-called “carbon credits” has provided another arena in which all the major national capitalist classes—the US, China, UK, the EU, Japan, Russia, India and more—can fight for their profit interests. Greenhouse gas emissions have been financialized and used to generate even higher profits for corporations, especially the fossil fuel magnates.

Most importantly, the promotion of new technologies, emission trading schemes, international agreements like the Kyoto Protocol and the 2015 Paris Accords are all based

around the idea that climate change can be resolved under the auspices of the “free market.” It is the primary lie peddled by such reports that the ongoing and accelerating ecological catastrophe has a capitalist solution. There is not, and the past 40 years of empty promises and inaction should be ample evidence for that.

The authors of the Assessment were forced to write, “While adaptation planning and implementation has advanced in the US, most adaptation actions to date have been incremental and small in scale.” It continues, “In many cases, more transformative adaptation will be necessary to adequately address the risks of current and future climate change.”

And how will this “transformative adaptation” occur? One must be clear, the climate crisis has reached a tipping point. Some of the more harrowing data presented shows that, even with aggressive measures, the impact of what has already taken place will continue to acidify the oceans and cause sea levels to rise “for thousands of years.” The lives of billions living now and billions more in the future are under direct threat.

There is no reason to surrender to these circumstances. The tasks are immense, but they are fundamentally political, not technological. It is not “humanity” in the abstract that is responsible for the crisis, it is capitalism, a definite form of socioeconomic organization developed around the pursuit of private profit and the division of the world into nation-states.

Thus it is the struggle against capitalism that must form the basis for a real solution to climate change. And that struggle must be based on a turn to the working class, which is the only progressive international social force on the planet. Climate change can be solved on nothing less than a world scale, and this solution can only be achieved as part of the broader struggle to place society as a whole on higher, socialist and international foundations.

Appeals to the powers-that-be for a change in policies fall on deaf ears. The capitalists are concerned with making profit and defending their wealth, and that means ecological devastation, genocidal wars, surrender to global pandemics, endless growth of social inequality, and a frontal assault on democratic rights. The fight against climate change must be unified with the growing strike wave across the world to build an international working class movement as part of the revolutionary struggle to establish socialism.



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