

## Even with new Biden GHG reduction goal, the US must step up its climate adaptation game

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*This commentary is part of a series on emerging issues from Adaptation Leader.*

President Biden has demonstrated a clear commitment to climate action in the opening months of his presidency. Within the first week, he issued an [Executive Order](#) on the climate crisis, leading the US to rejoin the Paris Agreement, committing to significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and launching a National Climate Task Force to integrate climate action across all federal agencies. He followed up with the announcement of an [infrastructure plan](#) to build resilience in the nation's critical infrastructure and to prioritize frontline communities most vulnerable to climate change impacts. These early signs, while commendable, point to a continuing problem in the government's climate action approach – an overwhelming focus on mitigation efforts without an equal emphasis on adaptation and resilience. Perhaps plans for adaptation are in the works, but it is time to sketch out an agenda that recognizes “climate action” means more than GHG reduction or mitigation. Indeed, the Paris Agreement itself calls for a balance in mitigation and adaptation action and financing.

At the [Climate Adaptation Summit](#) in January, John Kerry, President Biden's Special Envoy for Climate, offered his first comments to an adaptation audience. He repeatedly made the [argument](#) that “the best [policy for] adaptation and resilience is to ... do more to hold the Earth's temperature increase to the Paris' stated 1.5 degrees.” Of course, keeping temperatures down is a priority, but that is mitigation, not adaptation. It was clear that Mr. Kerry needed to get up to speed on adaptation. With today's [Leaders Summit on Climate](#) convened by the Biden administration, and with representatives from 40 nations, another opportunity presented for a more sophisticated articulation of US climate adaptation strategy. While there was a breakout session dedicated to “Adaptation and Resilience” on the first day of the summit acknowledging the issue, it again appeared that U.S. leadership has only a vague familiarity with climate adaptation, offering very little in the way of new news, particularly compared to our international counterparts. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced a renewed commitment to the Conservation Reserve Program that is more focused on carbon sequestration with a vague mention to “reduce the impacts of climate change.” To his credit, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced a Request for Information on incorporating resilience and justice into FEMA programs, a potentially critical turning point for an agency historically focused on hazard mitigation and resilient infrastructure over adaptation. One bright spot came later in the day in a “Nature-Based Solutions” breakout session, when Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland announced the National Coastal Resilience Fund, which, through NOAA, “will provide \$34 million for nature-based approaches ... to advance restoration or enhancement of natural features, such as coastal wetlands, dunes, and coral reefs, to protect coastal communities and infrastructure from flooding, while also improving habitat for fish and wildlife.” Overall, however, it was disappointing to see the continuing reluctance of the U.S. to use the widely accepted “adaptation” terminology, instead hewing to the “resilience” theme adopted by the Obama administration in response to political and cultural pressures. It is time to talk about adaptation openly as part of any discussion of “climate action” and join the international discourse as framed in the Paris Agreement. Climate change is here, it is inescapable, and we must figure out ways to adjust to its impacts while continuing to reduce our emissions footprint. The first task came at today's Summit when Kerry submitted the U.S.'s new commitment to emissions reduction in its

Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement. The [updated NDC](#) calls for a 50-52% reduction in emissions by 2030 compared with 2005 levels, and while there is clearly a need for [ambitious mitigation action](#), there has been no equivalent commitment on the adaptation side. Several countries include national adaptation plans as part of these commitments, and Adaptation Leader urges Biden to commit to developing a National Adaptation Strategy that moves beyond [climate-proofing infrastructure](#) to include managed retreat; nature-based solutions; market-based climate risk valuation, smart growth urban planning and built environment strategies; and human health and well-being protections. Furthermore, a robust national adaptation measuring, reporting, and verification (AMRV) system must be developed for long-term monitoring and evaluation.

The [American Society of Adaptation Professionals](#) has correctly asserted that while it is “considered best practice in the adaptation field to ensure that resilience solutions are socially equitable, ecologically sound ... there is no mechanism in place to help ensure solutions are designed and implemented accordingly.” Establishing such a mechanism would ensure consistency across U.S. efforts to measure the impact and progress of its adaptation efforts. To support this work, [Resilience 21](#), a coalition of more than 50 adaptation and resilience practitioners, recommended that the Biden administration appoint a Federal Climate Resilience Officer in the White House Office of Domestic Climate Policy to guide interagency efforts. Adaptation Leader supports this effort and further calls for sufficient staffing of adaptation experts throughout the agencies, as there seems to be an overwhelming representation of climate experts who are mitigation focused. Furthermore, Biden has the opportunity to tap into proven outside expertise on issues of adaptation by establishing an Adaptation and Resilience Advisory Council to provide the government with guidance on developing a [National Adaptation Strategy](#) and measuring America’s progress on adapting to the impacts of climate change. Similar to the [Environmental Justice Advisory Council](#), the Adaptation Advisory Council would be made up of experts from civil society, BIPOC communities, professional groups, the private sector, and academia. There should be regional representation from across the U.S. to reflect the variability of climate risks (flooding, drought and wildfires, severe storms, sea level rise, etc.) as well as the urban vs. rural experience. Because adaptation is so closely linked with climate justice in the communities that are impacted most severely, at least half the Council should be representatives from frontline communities.

Formalizing collaboration between national and subnational actors to tackle climate change should also be a priority, since the subnational level is where most climate action has been over the last four (and arguably longer) years, with some U.S. state and local governments advancing ambitious climate adaptation strategies and becoming leaders on the international stage. As the [GEOS Institute](#) points out, “there are increasing regulatory mandates pushing local governments to undertake climate resilience planning, yet technical support is generally lacking and varies by state.” No successful federal strategy can discount the bottom-up success of subnational approaches, and any federal climate policy has to complement and empower action by states, municipalities, and the private sector, while also supporting them by providing federal resources, financial, technical, or otherwise.

Biden’s commitment to adaptation must be elevated to equal footing in U.S. foreign climate policy as well. As such, Biden should commit to ensuring that at least 50 percent of U.S. international climate finance commitments are channeled towards investments in adaptation, with much of the adaptation funding delivered in the form of grants, favoring bilateral channels that reach the poorest and most vulnerable. In addition, the U.S. must deliver on its outstanding 2014 pledge of \$2 billion to the [Green Climate Fund](#) while renewing its commitment to mobilize \$100 billion per year in climate finance in line with the climate accords. In his recently proposed [2022 Presidential Budget](#), under the section “Tackling the Climate

Crisis," Biden called for just a \$1.2 billion contribution to the Green Climate Fund, failing to meet the earlier pledge. Through its enormous influence on the global finance sector, the U.S. also has the opportunity to lead the charge in requiring the disclosure of climate risks to support adaptation efforts in developing countries.

Today's Leaders Summit showed that the world is happy and hopeful to see the U.S. re-engaged in the global climate discourse after four years of climate inaction and denialism under the Trump administration. But the question remains whether the Biden administration will use this opportunity to position the U.S. as a leader not just through ambitious mitigation action, but through a cohesive adaptation policy as well. Sidelining adaptation risks the lives and livelihoods of the most impacted Americans and shirks our responsibility to developing countries who suffer from America's history of extreme carbon emissions. As Frank Bainimarama, President of Fiji and past President of COP 23, stated, "The inescapable half of the climate equation — adaptation — demands American leadership, innovation, ambition, and finance on a scale that atones for the last four wasted years." Adaptation Leader calls for President Biden to reimagine the U.S.'s climate action vision as one that centers adaptation *and* mitigation for a more just and sustainable world.