



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of Domestic Social Development

GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE
September 2015

“Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day.”

--Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, June 18 2015

BACKGROUND

In his wide-ranging encyclical on human and natural ecology, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis calls on and challenges all people to protect creation and our common home. The Pope makes clear that our care for one another and our care for the earth are intimately bound together. Climate change is one of the principal challenges facing society and the global community. The effects of climate change are borne by the most vulnerable people, whether at home or around the world. The Catholic Church brings a distinct perspective to the debate about climate change by lifting up the moral dimensions of this issue and the needs of the most vulnerable among us. As Catholics our faith calls us to care for *all* of God’s creation, especially the ‘least of these’ (Mt 25:40).

Greenhouse gases are a major contributor to climate change. Many experts have determined that current and projected concentrations of greenhouse gases endanger public health and the welfare of future generations. Power plants are the largest stationary source of carbon pollution in the United States: about one third of all greenhouse gas pollution in the U.S. comes from the generation of electricity by power plants.

On August 3, the EPA, as directed by the president, finalized the first national standards to reduce carbon pollution from currently operating power plants. These standards create a federal-state partnership, with the EPA setting state goals for reducing carbon dioxide emissions and states deciding how best to meet these goals. Nationwide, by 2030, these standards will reduce carbon dioxide emissions from the power sector by 32 percent.

In the United States, power plants have often been located near low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Air pollution from these plants contributes to health problems, especially in the young and the elderly. These standards would significantly reduce carbon pollution from power plants; they would also reduce particle pollution, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxides, which have been linked to important human and environmental health problems.

Around the world, these effects are even more severe. Catholic Relief Services is helping the most vulnerable people respond to increasing floods, droughts, food and water insecurity, and conflict over declining resources. All these are making the lives of the world’s poorest people even more precarious. These standards are a vital first step to protecting the world’s most vulnerable people and allow the United States to exercise critical leadership necessary for achieving a global agreement.

Pope Francis has made known his intention to encourage the success of December’s UN Climate Change Conference in Paris. He wants to raise the moral imperative to reach an agreement that addresses the potentially catastrophic consequences of climate change, and in the process, protects poor and vulnerable peoples and nations.

USCCB POSITION

The U.S. bishops promote prudent action predicated on justice to address the growing impact of global climate change. As the bishops note in *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, “Action to mitigate global climate change must be built upon a foundation of social and economic justice.”

In the absence of a legislative agenda to address climate change, regulatory measures are the only real opportunity to meet this challenge. In a [July 30, 2014 letter](#) to the EPA and in testimony at an EPA public hearing, Archbishop Thomas Wenski and Bishop Richard Pates, Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, and former Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, respectively, expressed support for a national standard to reduce carbon pollution and offered moral principles to guide the EPA and states as they take steps to reduce carbon pollution. These principles include: care for creation, promotion of the common good, respect for the human person, and a priority for those who are poor and vulnerable. In particular, the bishops urged that as these standards are implemented, workers negatively impacted should be assisted, and any increased utility costs should be distributed fairly, without undue burden on the poor. The bishops also recognized the important flexibility given to states in determining how best to meet the emissions goals set by the EPA.

U.S. action to reduce carbon emissions has global significance. As the bishops wrote: “These standards demonstrate the commitment of the United States to address climate change and create an opportunity for the United States to exercise the critical leadership necessary for achieving a globally negotiated climate change agreement.”

The bishops also support the international Green Climate Fund that will help developing nations shift towards a low-emission and climate resilient development, and help them adapt to the impacts of climate change. As Pope Francis wrote: Poor developing nations “require the help of countries which have experienced great growth at the cost of the ongoing pollution of the planet” (172).

ACTION

National standards to reduce carbon pollution from power plants represent an important opportunity to protect the health and welfare of all people, especially children, the elderly and poor and vulnerable communities.

Multiple efforts are anticipated in Congress to block the EPA from developing and implementing carbon pollution standards. Options available to Congress include passing a Congressional Review Act, which would overturn the rule, or using the appropriations process to block the EPA from using funds to develop or implement the regulations.

During this Congress, remain engaged in the public debate on climate change. As Archbishop Wenski urged in his [June 24 letter](#) to Congress, ask government leaders to:

“[O]ppose legislation and appropriations riders designed to reverse efforts to implement a national standard to reduce carbon pollution from existing power plants.”

RESOURCES

- USCCB Environmental Justice Program Page: <http://www.usccb.org/environment>
- *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good* at: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/global-climate-change-a-plea-for-dialogue-prudence-and-the-common-good.cfm>
- Catholic Climate Covenant at: <http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/>

For further information, contact Cecilia Calvo, Environmental Justice Program Coordinator, USCCB, 202-541-3188, ccalvo@usccb.org