

Testimony of Reed Schuler
Senior Policy Advisor to Governor Jay Inslee
State of Washington

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Chairman Rouda, Ranking Member Green, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about solutions to the climate crisis.

I am Reed Schuler, Senior Policy Advisor for Climate and Sustainability to Governor Jay Inslee of Washington State. Previously, I served at the U.S. Department of State as a U.S. negotiator of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and as a member of the Secretary of State’s Policy Planning Staff.

It is an honor to discuss with you today both the threat of climate change and the opportunity that awaits our nation in addressing the crisis head-on.

We have the enormous responsibility of living through a critical turning point in national and global history. The decisions we make as a society today and in the coming years will determine the extent to which we succeed or fail in one of the most profound tests our world has ever faced.

If we rise to the challenge, we will have overseen a transition away from dirty fossil fuels toward clean sources of energy, and a transformation of the American economy in which each sector has been decarbonized: buildings, transportation, industry, electricity, agriculture, and more. We will have brought our people not just protection from the many impacts of climate change, but cleaner air and water, better health, energy savings, and new good, living-wage jobs. If we fail this test, the consequences — summarized across thousands of pages of scientific literature from every continent — will be severe and irreparable.

Under Governor Inslee’s leadership, Washington State has taken on a leadership role in fighting this crisis, to the tangible benefit of Washingtonians. We are growing clean energy jobs, creating new economic opportunity for businesses and entrepreneurs, and setting our state on a course toward a clean, equitable, carbon-free future. And we are not alone. We are joined in this fight by our fellow states, cities, tribes, civic and religious groups, students, and people from all walks of life — who, as we do, understand the climate crisis to be an existential threat that cannot be ignored.

Yet even as we continue these efforts, we also recognize a stark truth: our country and the global community cannot succeed in the long-term without vigorous federal leadership on this issue.

Historic Western Fires Fueled by Climate Change

When we speak of the climate crisis, we do not speak of an abstract future. The pain that climate change deals to our communities is not something that Americans will start to experience in ten or twenty years.

The acute effects of climate change are with us today.

Those of us in the west have been suffering this month from just one of the threats of climate change: a serious acceleration of fire risk. It took less than a week for fires in Washington State to grow into the second-worst fire season ever recorded. The worst fire season came just five years prior.

Even for the lucky ones among us — those without asthma, with jobs that allow them to work indoors when the air is hazardous, with homes that are not in the path of wildfires — these hazardous conditions are punishing, creating a grim, unrecognizably smoke-choked landscape, with air quality monitors up and down the coast registering the world's most polluted, hazardous air. For nearly two weeks, I couldn't safely let my children go outdoors. For the less fortunate, the costs are orders of magnitude more devastating: hospitalizations for dangerous respiratory conditions, destroyed homes and businesses, lives lost, and whole communities devastated.

Fires have always been part of the western landscape. But the extent and viciousness of these fires is staggering even to firefighters and scientists who are used to the awe-inspiring scale of western wildfires. What we have experienced over the last five years is simply without precedent in modern history.

The fires are changing because the climate is changing. As my fellow panelist knows, the Union of Concerned Scientists has said that average annual temperatures in the western United States have increased by almost 2° F since 1970. With changing temperatures has come a longer fire season, and with hotter prevailing air temperatures allowing the air to absorb more moisture, soils, grasses, bushes, and trees are all drying more rapidly, creating ideal tinder and priming our lands for ignition from many possible sources. While some people are trying to point the finger at narrow triggers like forest management, climate change is creating the underlying conditions that make these fires not just possible, but inevitable.

Jessica Halofsky, Director of the Western Wildland Environmental Threat Assessment Center, concluded of the recent Oregon fires, for example, that they “occurred under such extreme burning conditions that almost any level of forest would have burned.”

Across Washington, Oregon, and California, more than 5 million acres went up in flames in recent weeks. It's hard to visualize, but that represents land area about the size of Massachusetts — larger than New Jersey or Hawaii — and similar to Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Delaware combined. Satellite photos revealed a continental-scale weather system of smoke.

These apocalyptic events are not wildfires — they are climate fires. As Governor Inslee said last week in an open letter to the President: “There is no fire suppression plan on this planet that does anyone any good if it doesn’t even acknowledge the role of climate change.”

Tragically, the danger is only growing stronger each year.

The National Climate Assessment is a congressionally-mandated report produced every two years, the gold-standard consensus of American science regarding climate impacts on the United States. The last assessment was conducted in 2018 by 13 federal agencies and produced during the Trump administration, and it concluded: “By the middle of this century, the annual area burned in the western United States could increase 2–6 times from the present.”

Present levels of fires are already unbearable, the threat of a significant increase from these levels almost unimaginable. Yet imagine it we must. While today “fire season” is a technical term, if we fail in the fight against climate change, it may replace “summer” in the western vocabulary.

Climate Crisis Fuels Disaster in Every Corner of the U.S. and the World

This litany of climate-fueled wildfire horror may feel unique to the western United States, distant and abstract in areas of the country less prone to fire. These fires, however, are merely the latest and most visible consequence of climate change in our region.

The sad truth is that while climate change will vary in its consequences — and wildfires are by no means the only climate threat in our state — it will leave no part of our country unscathed. From flooding and agricultural productivity losses in the Midwest, to rising sea levels in the Gulf Coast, to increased frequency and intensity of hurricanes across the East Coast, climate change brings with it a dizzying array of risks, from more extreme weather events, to widely varying threats to our health, economy, and natural resources.

According to the University of Washington’s Climate Impacts Group, here are the some of the other projected climate impacts our state is expecting if the globe breaches the **1.5° C temperature goal** — keeping in mind the world is on track to far exceed this threshold:

- **67 percent increase in the number of days above 90° F each year**, leading to an increased risk of heat-related illness and death, warmer streams, and more frequent algal blooms;
- **38 percent decrease in the state's snowpack**, leading to reduced water storage, irrigation shortages, and winter and summer recreation losses;
- **16 percent increase in winter streamflow**, leading to higher risk of river flooding;
- **23 percent decrease in summer streamflow**, leading to reduced summer hydropower, conflicts over water resources, and negative effects on salmon populations; and
- **1.4 foot rise in sea level**, leading to coastal flooding and inundation, damage to coastal infrastructure, and bluff erosion.

While every community will suffer the effects of unabated climate change, we know its effects will be felt disproportionately by the most vulnerable among us — including the rural and urban poor, our tribal nations, and communities of color. This maldistribution is not just the result of these communities’ greater exposure to the effects of climate change, but also the existing burdens of environmental injustice — dirtier air and water — and the lack of financial means to cope with extraordinary new challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has both revealed and intensified the extraordinary inequities in American society. Climate change threatens to do the same. It is morally incumbent upon us as a society to protect our most vulnerable.

Around the world, the impacts on some other nations may be even more extreme, with the intersection of extreme exposure to climate risk and highly vulnerable populations and fragile governments. A single major event such as broad crop failures or a catastrophic hurricane can overstress institutions already on the brink of failure. In this way, climate change has the capacity to accelerate and exacerbate multiple overlapping crises.

These challenges will not only pose a severe threat to the lives of millions of people across the globe; they will also pose significant risks to the United States’ national security. The unclassified 2016 National Intelligence Council report, “Implications for U.S. National Security of Anticipated Climate Change,” concluded:

- *“Many countries will encounter climate-induced disruptions—such as weather-related disasters, drought, famine, or damage to infrastructure—that stress their capacity to respond, cope with, or adapt. ... In the most dramatic cases, state authority may collapse partially or entirely.”*
- *“Over 20 years, the net effects of climate change on the patterns of global human movement and statelessness could be dramatic, perhaps unprecedented.”*
- *“Climate change and its resulting effects are likely to pose wide-ranging national security challenges for the United States and other countries over the next 20 years ... though models forecast the most dramatic effects further into the future.”*

These risks to communities at home and broad are real, severe, and growing rapidly. But they are not inevitable; rather, they are the costs of inaction if the U.S. and the global community fail to tackle this challenge.

We Can Solve the Climate Crisis

We have the ability to harness the innovative, moral, and entrepreneurial spirit of the United States, and to embark on a national mobilization to defeat the climate crisis, lead the global community, and prevent our people from suffering the worst of the consequences that are projected by scientists. What is needed is the right leadership.

Yet under the Trump administration, we have witnessed a shameful abandonment of federal leadership on climate change and a deep hostility toward environmental stewardship at all levels. This administration has made a mockery of state autonomy and the principle of federalism —

repeatedly working to attack the long-honored authority of states to protect our own residents. It has systematically dismantled decades of progress in protecting clean air and clean water. This vacuum in federal leadership creates disruption and uncertainty, as states are forced to scramble to protect their natural resources and their citizens.

That vacuum has been met by an explosion of civic commitment, scientific exploration, technological innovation, dedicated advocacy, and political leadership at the state and local level. States like Washington are not waiting for sanity to be restored at the federal level; we are leading the way in combating carbon pollution, growing our economies, and protecting the health of our residents. Our approach in Washington has been a commonsense one — putting in place the standards and investments we need, sector by sector, to transition away from fossil fuels and decarbonize our economy. We are glad to be joined in these efforts by many other leaders across the country.

Our state is leading in the fight against carbon pollution with policies such as:

- The Clean Energy Transition Act, a nation-leading framework that achieves our goal as a member of the global Powering Past Coal Alliance by phasing out all coal by 2025, requiring carbon neutrality by 2030, and 100 percent carbon-free power by 2045. Crucially, at the same time this policy strips fossil fuels from our power sector, it also makes major strides toward supporting high-quality jobs, with a sliding scale of incentives for clean energy projects that meet high wage and labor standards. The policy also requires an improvement in utility programs to assist low-income ratepayers. We view this law as a model for sector-based climate action, with clear benchmarks for achieving the total decarbonization of the power sector, and complementary policies to ensure these goals are achieved in a way that supports workers and communities.
- Ambitious, science-aligned statutory limits on carbon pollution and a net-zero goal: by 2030, reducing overall emissions of greenhouse gases to 45 percent below 1990 levels (a 48% reduction from 2005 levels); by 2050, reducing overall emissions of greenhouse gases in the state to 95 percent below 1990 levels; and achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.
- The phasedown of super-polluting hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), some of which are thousands of times more potent warming agents than carbon dioxide, through an ambitious but achievable timetable mirroring the federal approach discarded by the Trump administration. Washington was an early state mover, helping to build a growing coalition of states implementing the phase-down, creating an opportunity for American industry, and building added urgency for congressional action.
- A first-of-its kind statewide building performance standard for Washington's commercial buildings, combined with an efficiency incentive program. Retrofitting our existing building stock to be more efficient and incorporate advanced buildings technologies to reduce energy use and emissions is not only necessary if we are going to meet our climate goals, but also creates thousands of good-paying jobs in the building and construction trades.

- A broad suite of tools to reduce carbon pollution from the transportation sector, accelerate the deployment of electric vehicles on our roads, and electrify our ferries (the largest ferry system in the nation and a significant source of carbon pollution and diesel particulate matter). We are proud to be among the leadership states that are both Clean Car states and Zero Emission Vehicle states, ensuring that Washingtonians benefit from cleaner air and the electric vehicle revolution. The Trump Administration is fighting an illegal effort to overturn the decades-long and statutorily protected right of states to participate in setting stronger vehicle standards than those of the federal government, but this delay does not weaken our resolve.
- The Clean Energy Fund, through which Governor Inslee has invested more than \$150 million in strategic research, demonstration, and deployment of clean technology and electricity grid modernization, growing our state's research and entrepreneurial clean energy ecosystems. These dollars, especially when matched with federal funds, provide a pipeline for our research institutions to develop and deploy clean energy technology, and support the next generation of science and technology leaders.

We have consistently stepped up to fill the vacuum of federal leadership. In 2017, the Trump administration made the disastrous decision to announce a withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The next day, Governor Inslee announced, with California's then-Governor Jerry Brown and New York's Andrew Cuomo, the formation of the United States Climate Alliance (USCA), a coalition of states working to advance the goals of the Paris Agreement and the 2025 U.S. emission reduction target, and to accelerate new and existing policies to reduce carbon pollution and promote clean energy deployment at the state and federal level.

From this founding group of three governors, our coalition has grown rapidly to 25 governors of both parties, representing a majority of the country's population and economy. Through 2018, USCA states have reduced their greenhouse gas emissions from 2005 levels at double the rate of non-USCA states. Our ranks have continued to grow, with the most recent addition of Montana earlier this year.

Importantly, our states are demonstrating the enormous economic opportunity in the clean energy transition. Opponents of climate action have routinely made wild and unsupported claims regarding the supposed drag on economic growth caused by climate action. These claims bear no resemblance to reality. At the same time that USCA states have made significant progress on reducing emissions, we have also grown our economies more than 30 percent faster than non-Climate Alliance states.

...But We Cannot Solve It Alone

American leadership is crucial, but it is not enough to solve a truly global problem. To defeat the scourge of climate change, the United States must reassert its leadership on the global stage and work collaboratively with countries around the world to seek a sustained and global decarbonization through domestic efforts and the Paris Agreement.

At a time when global partnership is most important, the United States is headed down the disastrous pathway toward isolation from the global community. In 41 days, our withdrawal from the Paris Agreement will be complete. As a lead U.S. negotiator who worked with my colleagues for years to finalize this historic agreement, it is personally heartbreaking for me to watch the President work to dismantle U.S. leadership domestically and internationally, and attempt to disrupt global consensus and dismantle this critical framework for action. It is especially appalling that he's done so while downplaying the threat climate change poses to Americans, calling the crisis a "hoax," and undermining the scientific consensus that climate change is real and threatens our way of life.

Nearly every other country in the world is a party to the Paris Agreement. Of the tiny handful that are not yet formal parties, all have signed the Agreement and indicated their intent to join. The United States will be literally the only country in the world uncommitted to the Paris Agreement, a dangerous position that is opposed by a majority of the American population.

In fact, there is an enormous level of ongoing American commitment to the Paris Agreement, with nearly 4,000 states, cities, tribes, colleges and universities, businesses, faith groups, and investors who are now part of the "We Are Still In" movement. The hugely diverse climate movement in the United States today is working tirelessly to usher in the clean energy transition.

Federal Action is Crucial

While state and local action must continue, it has never been clearer that federal leadership on climate is essential to defeating this crisis and keeping Americans safe. States and local governments simply cannot solve a problem of this magnitude on our own. The next phase of federal work must begin by rolling back the myriad of anti-climate regulations put forward by the Trump administration — from attacks on clean car standards that have saved lives and reduced consumer costs, to the gutting of commonsense standards to prevent methane leaks, and so many more. But the work can't stop there.

We need the federal government to work with states and others to undertake a sweeping decarbonization of the U.S. economy and embark on a clean energy transition that can create millions of new, good-paying jobs while tackling the single greatest crisis facing humanity. States have been laboratories of climate action for years, pioneering the kind of clean energy solutions that Americans need, and we stand ready and willing to partner with you on federal solutions to the climate crisis.

We believe future federal action on climate change should occur along the following principles:

- **Equity and environmental justice.** We must prioritize reducing the disproportionate burdens – economic, pollution, racial discrimination, exposure to climate and environmental costs, and others – faced by vulnerable communities.
- **Good jobs and just transition.** We must emphasize the development of high-quality, living-wage jobs, and pay careful attention to supporting economic transition for workers and communities affected by climate change and the response.

- **Health.** Our policies must focus on protecting near-term and long-term health outcomes across the country.
- **Consumer costs.** The economic transformation should reduce long-term consumer costs.
- **Enable leadership at all levels.** The federal government should set a responsible minimum floor for action, but should enable leadership by states and cities that are capable of moving faster to reduce pollution and protect their residents.
- **Ambition and science.** Our policies and emission trajectory must be ambitious, commensurate with the scale of the problem, and guided by science.

The many subnational leaders on climate action await a restoration of federal leadership on climate action. We are pleased to see Congress considering legislation this week that include significant steps forward on decarbonizing our energy system, including a phase-down of super-polluting HFCs, which is long overdue. There is much more to do in the months and years ahead, and states are ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work with a willing federal partner.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to answering your questions.