

Green New Deal's focus on renewable energy could fight global warming, create healthier communities, says expert

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Jennie Stephens. Credit: Adam Glanzman/Northeastern University

The Green New Deal, a proposal taken up by scores of members of Congress this month, aims to use "clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources" to provide 100 percent of the power used in the U.S.

Not only would a transition to renewable [energy](#) drastically slow the pace of global warming, it could also be the catalyst for the creation of millions of jobs, the equitable distribution of power, and the creation of healthier communities that are better suited to bounce back from disaster, says Jennie Stephens, a professor of sustainability science and policy at Northeastern University.

"By changing the energy system in a deliberate, intentional way, there are opportunities for changing all these other social injustices that are so prevalent," says Stephens, who is director of the School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs as well as director for strategic research collaborations at the Global Resilience Institute.

Stephens acknowledges that wholesale global transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy would be disruptive for a while: uprooting jobs, requiring large initial investments in infrastructure and technology, restructuring energy grids, and changing how we use energy.

She says that government investment and innovative energy policies could help create a financial framework for such massive change.

"It's widely accepted that the costs of investing in renewable energy are high," Stephens says, "but we also have to consider that the cost of not investing could be higher."

Think about your daily routine and everything that requires energy within it: Your alarm clock (or your phone) is plugged into the wall. The lights in the bathroom require electricity. The stove where you cook your breakfast. The car or train you take to work. Heat in the winter. Air

conditioning in the summer. The elevator in your building. The coffee pot. Your computer.

Considering how much we rely upon energy, Stephens says, changing the energy system could change lots of other parts of our lives.

Stephen's article on energy democracy was recently published in the international scientific journal *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*. She'll be speaking about the ways renewable energy sources can change societies at a [climate change conference](#) at Northeastern on Friday. Several other climate scientists and artists will lead discussions and presentations, as well.

"Energy is such an essential part of society that when we think about changing our [energy system](#), we see that we can change some other fundamental dynamics in our society," she says.

Stephens argues that the world's reliance on fossil fuels for energy has concentrated economic and political power to a handful of countries rich in oil and a handful of companies that mine and sell it.

"This concentration of wealth and power has increased inequities and vulnerabilities and weakened societal resilience," she says.

Her argument is that this dynamic has created a "predatory relationship" between fossil fuel providers and the people who are reliant upon them to light and heat their houses, or to run transportation systems, for example.

Because fossil fuels are also finite, countries have to compete for limited resources, a competition that also favors the wealthier, more powerful countries.

Renewable energy—which relies on the sun, wind, water, or geothermal heat—poses neither of these challenges, Stephens says.

Unlike [fossil fuels](#), which are found only in certain parts of the world, everyone everywhere has access to some mix of [renewable energy sources](#) that, when harnessed, could fully power communities and enable them to be self-sufficient, she says.

Communities on the coastlines might rely upon tidal or wave energy, whereas rural communities might rely upon wind or geothermal energy.

"This would look different in every community in the world; [renewable energy](#) doesn't mean just solar panels everywhere," Stephens says.

Provided by Northeastern University

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