

# Climate words and climate deeds

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With the U.N. Council of Parties (COP26) starting in full swing last week, the world was filled with news from the Climate Industry's biggest trade show. These meetings have the value of focusing attention on this critical issue and can motivate corporate and government climate action

to demonstrate support of the global climate agenda. Like Earth Day every April, it provides a useful deadline for an organization's internal advocates of environmental sustainability. An excellent example of the influence of climate meetings took place on October 28th when the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey announced new and ambitious greenhouse gas reduction goals.

According to a Port Authority press release:

"Ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey today announced that two critical policies will be presented to the agency Board for formal adoption in November. The first policy would commit the agency to the goal of achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The second policy would commit the agency to the goal of cutting direct greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030.... Once adopted, the Port Authority will be the first U.S. transportation agency to set a net-zero target for all emissions. The agency also laid out detailed and ambitious initiatives to accelerate progress in reducing emissions. This new package of proposed actions... will reduce the agency's direct emissions through facility-wide sustainability initiatives in the areas of electrification, renewable energy, and sustainable buildings/energy efficiency."

One could argue that these are simply more [climate](#) words in the form of policies and targets, but what is most significant is the detail provided and the specific moves the Authority will take to meet these targets. It is the operational definition of the difference between climate words and climate deeds. The specifics include typical actions such as replacing old fossil fuel-powered vehicles with new electric vehicles, but then gets ambitious and technology-forcing by requiring:

"...the transition at Port Authority airports to clean zero-emissions

electric airport ground support equipment to the maximum extent practicable, as such equipment become available from manufacturers. Beginning with the phase-out by 2027 of fossil-fueled baggage tugs, belt loaders, and aircraft positioning tractors, this initiative will replace "dirty" models that produce greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants..."

The announcement also includes initiatives on renewable energy, sustainable buildings, and energy efficiency. Unlike broad global and national targets and policies, the Port Authority's statement gets quite detailed and granular. That is because they operate a set of facilities and they can choose to continue to operate the way they do today, or they can begin the transition to a greener operation. They have committed to a long and difficult change process. They understand that this is hard work and a long road. According to Christine Weydig, the Port Authority's Director of Sustainability:

"To reach this net-zero goal by 2050, we will be working diligently with stakeholders across all of our business lines to accelerate the transition to a low-carbon economy and bring those economic opportunities and environmental benefits to our local communities."

When people despair about our climate future and the [environmental sustainability](#) of the modern economy, I like to point out that we are in the early stages of a major transformation in how our economy operates. Evidence of change is everywhere. Hertz is buying 100,000 Teslas. More and more companies are setting pollution reduction targets. New York City's government is working to reduce the carbon footprint of its 4,000 buildings. Even more important is when these decisions slowly become reflected in facility and machinery design parameters. Engineers are asked to reduce the use of energy and toxics. Farmers are trying to reduce pollution runoff from their fields. Not everywhere, not all at once, but a paradigm shift has begun. A new understanding of how the

world works focuses attention on reducing environmental impacts. It is replacing the old philosophy, which stated: "To make an omelet, you've got to break some eggs." Or "the solution to pollution is dilution."

In New York City, nothing focused the mind like five inches of rain in a single hour. In the U.S. West, an expanding season of forest fires produced air that was barely breathable. In Texas, a frozen power system plunged the state into several weeks without electricity. These disasters were communicated instantly and globally and now impact how we view our planet and its vulnerability.

While slow and steady progress is being made in many places, climate activists argue that it's too slow and inadequate to confront the crisis that we face. Climate change is a grave threat, but it is not the only threat we face. Poverty, war, racism, xenophobia, crime, and corruption are also major threats. If we stopped using fossil fuels immediately, the world would be plunged into a worldwide economic depression leading to starvation, political instability, and terrorism. While I admire the voice and face of the youth climate movement, Greta Thunberg, she was simply wrong when she said that COP26 was a failure and that technology will not be sufficient to address the climate crisis. Her view is that the only solution is a radical change in our lifestyle and that the world's leaders are bad people who only care about themselves. It's true that world leaders are self-interested. I'm pretty sure that you don't get to run a country if you don't have a high degree of self-regard. But self-interest is a fact of life. To save the planet, we need to appeal to self-interest rather than guilt or altruism. We all depend on this one planet, and we have no choice but to convince people that the only way they can maintain their lifestyle is to invest in the transition to the green economy. Maintaining that the green economy can only be achieved through struggle and denial is a losing political argument and ultimately self-defeating. Most people like the way they live and are not interested in a message of denial and guilt. To address this environmental problem, we

need to better understand how we have worked on other environmental problems.

Immediate and dramatic environmental clean-up is not feasible. But it is also not needed. We are not facing immediate global catastrophe but a gradual degradation of our infrastructure, security, and way of life. There is no cliff or point of no return, just a long and gradual slippery slope that we need to learn to navigate and trend lines that need to be reversed. The creation of EPA in 1970 led to national environmental regulation and the development of new technology that has enabled us to clean up the environment while growing our economy. That is how we are going to reduce (not eliminate) greenhouse gasses. Public policy does not solve problems but makes problems less bad. It is remedial, serial, and incremental. Making people feel guilty for flying to a climate conference is a good way to alienate your powerful friends and is another case of climate words taking precedence over climate deeds. Would it be better if these folks went shopping, went to a casino or lounged by the pool? Don't we want them to care about the climate crisis? I don't think we make friends by shaming potential allies. We need everyone inside the tent helping to make the world a better place.

The work that the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey is doing to decarbonize is the real work of climate action. It's the roll up your sleeves and get something done work that will help reduce greenhouse gasses in the real world. Decarbonizing air travel will be a heavy lift, but it will only be done if travelers and airlines understand its importance and are given the time to marshal the resources needed to meet the challenge. Attacking and alienating airlines and travelers doesn't get the job done. Leadership from the Port Authority ensures that the public infrastructure that airlines use will not be a drag on airline sustainability efforts. Moreover, it sends the message that environmental sustainability is supported by elected leaders and there are business opportunities in the emerging green economy.

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