Memorandum

TO: Senior Advisor David Plouffe

FROM:

RE: Non-Congressional Climate Change Strategies

Date: April 9, 2012

Policy Background

The scientific consensus behind man-made climate change has become increasingly uniform over the last decade. In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report citing "unequivocal" evidence of increasing average air and ocean temperatures.[1] Given the varied and dire effects that are predicted from these increasing temperatures – which include rising sea levels, increasing frequency of major storms, and the potential for catastrophic collapses of ecosystems – the issue is simply too grave to ignore. This memo proposes a number of policy alternatives to deal with both the causes and effects of climate change, but given the reticence of Congress to act on the issue, focuses only on those alternatives that require no Congressional action.

The justification for the U.S. adopting a strong greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction strategy is twofold: first, implementing strong policies domestically will give the United States more credence at the international level to negotiate GHG reductions; second, the U.S. has the opportunity to economically benefit if it can become the world leader in clean technology, which it is well-poised to become if domestic demand boosts the nascent

[1] Pachauri, R.K. and Reisinger, A. (2007) *Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.* Geneva, Switzerland: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

industry.

In 2009, the American Clean Energy and Security Act was proposed in the House of Representatives. The act adopted a cap-and-trade system similar to the plan used by the EU, whereby emissions would be capped with tradable permits. Over the next few decades, the amount of emissions allowable would decrease. The Act passed the House, but failed in the Senate. Neither the House nor the Senate has had any major debate on a significant climate change bill since.

However, the Federal government has been essential to providing funding for billions of dollars worth of climate change research. According to a 2010 Congressional Budget Office report, the majority of that funding comes through the Department of Energy and NASA. In addition, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 more than tripled the previous annual amount of Federal funding to climate change related research.[2] However, there is a great deal more research and development needed in the field, particularly as the output of emissions from industry continues to rise.

Non-Congressional Policy Alternatives

Given the lack of support in Congress and the political danger associated with a bill that could cost industry jobs, this proposal assumes that there is no willingness on the part of Congress to participate in significant climate change policy. Therefore, the alternatives proposed here require no action by congress, and can be implemented by the President alone. It is realistically too late to "undo" the effects on the climate already done by carbon emissions. As such, these policy recommendations include steps to both reduce the amount

[2] Congressional Budget Office (2010) *Federal Climate Change Programs: Funding History and Policy Issues*. Washington, D.C.: CBO.

of GHGs released into the atmosphere and adapt to the unavoidable consequences.

1. Create a Federal plan of responsibilities

Currently, there is no coordinated assignment of responsibilities to Federal agencies with respect to climate change. Many of the potential dangers posed by climate change span the duties of multiple agencies. As cited by a report by the National Research Council, this creates the opportunity for "confusion or duplication".[3] Worse yet, agencies short on resources might avoid responsibilities that they think another agency might cover.

The President should create a plan of specific responsibilities for each existing agency or department under his control. These responsibilities should include all the expected potential effects of climate change, but also allow for the addition of as-yet unforeseen issues. An example would be keeping sudden disasters like hurricanes under the control of FEMA, but delegating slow-onset disasters like damage to coastlines from rising sea levels to the Department of Homeland Security. Water projects, like canals to serve areas of the Southwest that will likely face spreading desertification, should go to the Army Corps of Engineers.

The major upside to this proposal is that it requires few initial resources and little funding, and will likely not face large opposition. It provides a useful guide should any problem arise. It will make responsibilities clearer, avoiding inter-agency conflicts that could waste time, money, and potentially risk lives.

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[3] National Research Council Panel on Informing Effective Decisions and Actions Related to Climate Change (Diana Liverman, Co-chair; Peter Raven, Co-Chair) (2010) *Informing an Effective Response to Climate Change*. Washington, D.C.: The National Research Council

2. Launch a public education campaign

Making sure that the public fully understands the scope of climate change is important to encourage them to take steps toward reducing GHG emissions and for securing future political support for a climate change bill. A public information campaign should be spearheaded by the White House in coordination with private and nonprofit partners. This campaign should highlight the possible effects of global warming on local communities, teach steps that a household can take to prepare for such effects, and show how they can personally reduce emissions.

Research has shown that consumers are only willing to support climate change measures to the extent they feel is necessary based on "perceived cost and benefit".[4] A public information campaign that drives home the message of the enormous future cost may increase the desire for emission-reduction benefits. An example of this might be running a commercial in the Tampa Bay region that shows the areas that would be inundated with water with higher sea level, and highlight how large storm surges would put nearly one million residents at risk.[5] Other commercials could highlight sustained droughts in the Southwest and difficult growing conditions in the Great Plains. This effort would increase the perceived benefits from climate change research and spending, and potentially breed more support for a future law. These commercials could also stress consumer-level energy reduction, such as turning off lights or not idling your car. These

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[4] Christina Tobler, Vivianne H.M. Visschers, Michael Siegrist. "Addressing climate change: Determinants of consumers' willingness to act and to support policy measures". *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 32.3, September 2012, Pp. 197-207

[5] Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council (2006) *Sea Level Rise in the Tampa Bay Region*. Pinellas Park, FL: Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council.

micro-level changes can add to the country's energy conservation portfolio.

Efforts should be made to increase preparedness in communities that will become more susceptible to disaster in the future. Most households are prepared for the disasters most likely to strike their area, but not for the new or more powerful disasters that may accompany climate change. For example, stronger hurricanes coming out of the Gulf of Mexico may remain powerful farther up the Eastern seaboard, hitting communities that do not often see strong hurricanes and are ill prepared for them, like New York and Boston. Having household-level preparedness strategies may save countless lives simply through education and awareness.

3. Task an existing agency with iterative risk management

The President should consider tasking a particular agency with far-reaching responsibilities in climate change. These would include coordinating resources, serving as a repository of climate change data, sharing information with the public and researchers, and proposing policy solutions for the future. This sub-agency would likely be placed in the Department of Energy or the Department of Homeland Security.

Iterative risk management is an adaptive strategy for climate change recommended by the Committee on America's Climate Choices. It is made up of a repeated process of identification, decision, implementation, assessment, and monitoring to combat climate change. The core of this strategy is pursuing multiple options of combating and mitigating climate change, while also constantly reassessing metrics to make well-informed choices.[6]

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[6] National Research Council Committee on America's Climate Choices (Albert Carnesale, Chair) (2011) *America's Climate Choices*. Washington, D.C: The National Research Council.

This iterative risk management strategy should be the overarching task given to the agency. The group tasked with this project should consider many alternatives for climate change strategies, while also building a database of information for the public, researchers, and decision-makers. The funding for this project cannot be written into a budget without congressional approval, so the President should consider potential cuts that could fund it. There is likely to be strong opposition to large expenditures, so the office should start small but have concrete plans to expand in the future as its necessity becomes more apparent.

4. Coordinate with state and local governments

Cities are the greatest consumers of electrical energy, generate heat from surfaces like roads, produce enormous amounts of GHG emission from vehicle traffic, and absorb very little carbon dioxide because of a lack of green space. Cutting the energy needs of only the largest cities would drastically reduce U.S. GHG emissions. The president should consider coordinating with state and local government on plans for greener cities. Many cities, such as New York and Chicago, have already adopted climate change-ready urban planning methods.[7] Increased coordination between the President and these cities will serve to encourage already existing efforts and promote such efforts in cities that have yet to adopt them.

In addition, the President should consider holding a Presidential Summit on city-level climate strategies, hosting Mayors, Governors, and green city planners from across

[7] Revkin, Andrew. "Cities that Embrace the Adaptation Imperative". *The New York Times*, May 23, 2011. Accessed April 12, 2012. <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/23/cities-embrace-the-adaptation-imperative>

the country. The event will encourage the sharing of ideas between cities and potentially even build multi-city coalitions working for GHG reduction.

Although a major budget outlay would be impossible without Congress, the President may want to consider a future "race to the top" funding scheme for cities with the best GHG reduction and climate-preparation plans. Similar to the Department of Education's Race to the Top program, this program would come out of the Department of Energy and establish metrics for GHG reduction and climate change adaptation. A city-level program would cost much less than the educational plan and could achieve large carbon reductions in some of the country's most populous cities.[8]

Policy Recommendation – Task an Existing Agency

Given these policy alternatives, the most effective proposal is tasking an existing agency (Energy or Homeland Security) with broad-reaching climate change responsibilities including iterative risk management. Climate change is going to have many varied and unpredictable effects. While the other policy alternatives are certainly ideas that should be considered, they deal with more limited or micro-level problems. Only by creating an office that will look at the broad picture and serve as the President's coordinator on climate change issues can the country effectively deal with the macro-level problems it will encounter.

In addition, the office might be limited in resources in the short-term, but as the political will and public opinion on climate change grows more favorable, the office will have the opportunity to grow. Giving it a start now will allow it to begin to amass the

[8] U.S. Department of Education (2009) *Race to the Top Program Executive Summary*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Education.

experts and resources it will need in the future. The long-term goals of the office should include:

- Collect and share climate related information and serve as an archive for climate data. Currently there are numerous climate research facilities across the country, but no single, free, openly accessible database of research.
- Monitor progress in relation to metrics set out by the office, but also constantly revise these metrics based on available data.
- Attempt to make this data open and palatable to the public, releasing information in layman's terms that will increase public awareness on the issue.
- Serve as coordinator of "analytic deliberation", whereby decision-makers will meet with experts to understand problems and create goals. This will increase political understanding of the issue and breed effective policies.[9]
- Serve as the core of the iterative risk management strategy, a multi-pronged and iterative approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation approaches.

These policy alternatives will generate significant reductions in GHG emission and prepare for climate change despite little or no Congressional support. However, the President should consider having a major climate-change bill ready to save time in the future should the political winds change. As the political debates behind climate change fade and the data becomes more dramatic, the President should be ready to capitalize on the next opportunity to pass a significant climate bill.

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[9] National Research Council Committee on America's Climate Choices (Albert Carnesale, Chair) (2011) *America's Climate Choices*. Washington, D.C: The National Research Council.