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House of Representatives
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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Bicameral Task Force on Climate Change
Press Conference
January 24, 2013

Today, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse and I are announcing the formation of a bicameral task force on climate change.

We plan to focus on three key goals. We will try to raise awareness for our colleagues and the public about the dangers of climate change in Congress. We will provide a forum for developing effective policies to combat climate change. And we will work to enact measures that reduce carbon pollution, spur new technologies, and enhance efforts to adapt to the harm that climate change is already causing that we will not be able to avoid.

We will be inviting members of both parties both in the House and the Senate to join us in our efforts. Membership in the task force is open to all members of Congress, regardless of political party, who recognize the importance of climate change and the need for an effective policy response. And we will be working closely with the other leaders in Congress on climate change, like Barbara Boxer in the Senate and Ed Markey in the House.

While members of Congress often organize task forces, working groups, and coalitions, it is unusual for members to create a bicameral task force. We are taking this step because the time for action is now. Every day we wait ... every time we allow an opportunity to reduce our carbon pollution pass us by ... it becomes less likely that we will be able to prevent the worst impacts of climate change.

Unfortunately, the impacts of climate change are already beginning. The seas are rising faster than expected; the Arctic is melting faster; and the weather is growing more extreme. The bad weather we had last year was almost biblical in its intensity: searing droughts, raging wildfires, floods, and super storms. And that is mild compared to what we can expect in the future.

At the same time, our window to act is rapidly closing. We cannot afford to wait to take action. Once we release carbon into the atmosphere, it stays there for hundreds of years. There's only so much carbon that the atmosphere can hold before the impacts become irreversible. We are fast approaching that point of no return.

This threat is not waiting until we are ready to act on it. When the next generation looks back on this era, they won't be talking about what we did on the deficit or the fiscal cliff. It will be whether we rose to the historic challenge on global warming and climate change.

Members of both parties in both chambers of Congress have a moral obligation to act. President Obama was absolutely right when he said this week that if we fail to act, we will have "betrayed our children and future generations."

Earlier this month, the draft National Climate Assessment reminded us of that we must act now. This compilation of the very best science on what is already happening in the United States found more frequent and intense heat waves ... droughts ... extreme storms like Superstorm Sandy ... rising sea levels ...and far worse to come.

During the last four years, the Obama Administration has taken important steps in the right direction. Significant investments in solar and wind energy doubled the production of clean, renewable energy. The new tailpipe standards for automobiles will double fuel economy and produce major reductions in carbon pollution from passenger vehicles. The Environmental Protection Agency has proposed new standards for power plants.

But during the last two years, the House of Representatives has tried to thwart the President at every step. The Republican-led House of Representatives voted 53 times to block action on climate change.

House Republicans even voted to deny that climate change is occurring. When Congressman Rush and I wrote to the leadership of the Energy and Commerce Committee over 20 times requesting hearings on important developments related to climate change, we never received even a single response to our letters. That's a dismal record of inaction.

To help spur action, we are forming a bicameral climate change task force. Senator Whitehouse and I will work together to educate our colleagues and all Americans about the magnitude of the problem and the urgency of the threat we are confronting.

President Obama understands how important decisive presidential leadership on climate change is. We saw that earlier this week in his inaugural address. Today, we are writing to the President to urge him to take the next step and develop a comprehensive climate change plan using his broad administrative authorities.

Three years ago, the President pledged in Copenhagen that the United States will reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 17% below 2005 levels by 2020. Much to our dismay, Congress has not acted since then to meet this pledge. Now it is time for the President to act administratively to make sure the United States meets this goal and is on the path for further reductions going forward.

We believe the plan should also explain the specific steps federal agencies will take to accelerate investments in innovative clean-energy technologies and protect the many vulnerable regions of the nation from the worst effects of climate change.

We will do our part to assist in this effort. In the coming weeks, the task force intends to open a dialogue with all sectors of our economy about constructive steps the Administration can take to address climate change. We'll share those ideas with the Administration as it crafts its plan.

I'm really looking forward to working with Senator Whitehouse on this effort and want to turn it over to him for his remarks. But before I do, I just want to point out that throughout the last Congress, any efforts to address climate change were under constant assault here in the nation's capital. And throughout that dark time, Senator Whitehouse was undaunted. He was a voice of moral clarity on climate change when too few were standing up for our children and future generations. He deserves tremendous credit for what he has done.