



# Change of Atmosphere

*Connecting with Americans on Climate*

CONFERENCE REPORT

November 2011

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*start with people*

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**Mohit Blachford  
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## INTRODUCTION

Greetings,

On October 4, 2011, 80 strategic leaders representing academia, business, government, media, NGOs and foundations from various sectors gathered in Washington, DC to share thoughts on protecting people, ecosystems and our planet from the accelerating effects of atmospheric pollution. In a structured day of expert speakers and working groups, participants prioritized solutions to break through the roadblocks of legacy carbon interests and keep America at the forefront of economic and technological leadership.

ecoAmerica hosted this conference to help bring together these great minds to build collaboration and develop strategies and tactics to reignite progress on eco-climate challenges. This report summarizes the results of our intensive work.

Thank you very much to our sponsors, steering committee, participants and support team who worked so hard to make the day a success. None of us alone, organizationally or individually, can overcome the challenges we face from the massive pollution of our atmosphere. We need to work together to find the right paths and build momentum, synergy and success as we work toward solutions. At ecoAmerica, we pledge to do our part and look forward to continued collaboration with you.



Meighen Speiser  
Chief Engagement Officer



Bob Perkowitz  
Founder



## Session I: Moving Toward Climate Solutions



We need public support to attain effective solutions to climate change. The question is, how much, from whom, and how will we get it? ecoAmerica board member Lisa Renstrom introduced Session I with a reminder that progress toward adequate and timely climate solutions will require authentic connections with and support from a majority of Americans. “People need to carry the torch,” she said, “their torch.”

### SPEAKERS



#### **Ed Maibach, Director, 4C, George Mason University**

Maibach spoke from the “Six Americas” polling on attitudes toward climate change, which range from “dismissive” to “alarmed.” While most Americans believe Earth’s climate is warming, many are unsure of why or what it means for them or future generations. Maibach recommended a “one-two punch” to activate the “alarmed” and the “concerned” to publicly express their concerns because they make up 39% of America and have buying power to influence corporate climate solutions.



#### **Celinda Lake, President, Lake Research Partners**

According to Lake, climate change is a “political” issue that does not engage most American women. Great leverage can be achieved by showing women how climate solutions will help the well being of their families and communities. Many women think that opinions of scientists on climate change can be “bought,” but that those of teachers, nurses and ministers cannot. Lake suggested these other groups should take climate solutions to the “knitting listserves” and other places women gather.



#### **Meighen Speiser, Chief Engagement Officer, ecoAmerica**

ecoAmerica’s research shows that 14% of Americans are “achievers,” dedicated to the American Dream. Speiser recommended climate advocates focus on them as they serve as role models for another 30-40% of Americans. Achievers tend to be college-educated, married people who are busy ensuring their families will be happy, healthy, active and keep up with “the Joneses.” They will be attracted to common sense climate solutions that are practical, benefit them personally and do not hint of personal sacrifice.



#### **David Fenton, President, Fenton Communications**

Climate solutions are America’s way out of its current economic mess, according to Fenton. They can put people back to work and offer decreasing costs of living as clean energy sources are brought on line at scale. These solutions are available now. “People are attracted to energy prices that go down and energy sources that never run out,” he said. It’s time to show climate-change deniers as standing in the way of economic recovery.

## Session I: Discussion Group Priorities

Following these four thought-provoking presentations, conference participants broke into eight facilitated table discussions to consider who in America is ready to be engaged on climate and how to engage them? Their conclusions coalesced around people from four sectors: moms and their families; the business sector at all levels; local communities; and America's land-based rural/agricultural heartland. Conservatives, people of faith, youth, healthcare providers, states and victims of violent weather also surfaced as key targets for engagement.

### WHO AND HOW

**Women, moms and families** emerged as the favored agents of change on climate in America because of their concern for their families' current and future well being, coupled with their inherent resonance with health, nature and community. Participants concluded that these women could be authentically engaged in climate if solutions are linked to health, food availability and safety, "pocketbook" savings and protecting their families from risk. Favored ways of reaching these women and their families were through healthcare professionals, faith organizations, schools and the celebrities who inform their lifestyle choices (e.g. Rachel Ray and Oprah). A national campaign modeled on Race for the Cure or (RED)<sup>TM</sup> emerged as a potential way forward with this key group.

Participants chose the **American business community**, from small businesses to major corporations, as a second priority for climate engagement. Businesses will be naturally attracted to climate solutions because of cost savings, efficiencies and risk management that lead to increased profits, jobs and prosperity. The next generation of engaging this powerful and trend-setting American sector will be to emphasize opportunities for growing the national economy and reigniting American competitiveness. Businesses' embrace of climate solutions could be fast-tracked with a "Making America Better" campaign that applauds climate leaders in business through conservative media outlets such as *Fox News* and in *The Wall Street Journal*.

"**Make it local**" was another favored strategy for engaging Americans. We have a diverse nation, and in the face of national roadblocks, many states and local communities will recognize the opportunity to fortify their prosperity through climate preparedness, risk avoidance, reduced carbon related costs and generating potential carbon-tax revenues. Engagement of communities across America can be achieved through seeding target programs and recognizing progress and successful local climate solutions among mayors and other civic leaders through local media.

The fourth favored approach was to "**Make it real**" by engaging people most closely connected with the beauty and bounty of nature so they will advocate for climate awareness and solutions. People who work in and steward America's breadbasket are among the first to notice climatic shifts because of their effects on growing conditions and crop yields. Our nation's food supply chain – from farmers to gardeners to the grocery stores and farmers' markets where agricultural products are sold – would make powerful messengers in telling their stories to their peers and to the American consumers they feed.

In summary, the conclusions and recommendations from Session I pointed away from the top-down, Washington-led climate campaigns of the past and toward new approaches that catalyze promotion of climate solutions from within the ranks of moms, business leaders, community leaders and those who fill America's breadbasket – to enable these groups to personalize and localize climate messages, messengers and actions.

## Session II: What Can We Sell That Americans Will Buy



Session II identified and prioritized climate solutions that will resonate with, motivate and benefit Americans on a personal level and in ways they value. ecoAmerica board member Erik Blachford, a leader in carbon offset innovation, introduced this session by challenging participants to find a climate-solutions “product” to fit the “market” of mainstream America – a target audience that has so far eluded American climate advocates. “We need real impacts,” he said, “and something people can really do.”



### SPEAKERS

#### **Frances Beinecke, President, Natural Resources Defense Council**

The focus of climate solutions must be on “cars, coal and people,” Beinecke said. American people must be convinced to move away from cars that run on fossil fuels and demand that their electricity no longer come from coal. To convince them to buy into and demand these solutions, America needs a “political force” that can make climate mitigation a “human issue.”



#### **Joshua Freed, Vice President, Clean Energy Program, Third Way**

The best climate solution is clean energy innovation, and innovation is a core American value, Freed said. Americans “get” how innovation made America “rich and great.” But now “China is out-Americaning us” by supplying most of the \$2.3 trillion global market for clean energy technology, while America sits on the sidelines. “This isn’t about climate,” he said. “It’s about making money!”



#### **Rob Sisson, President, Republicans for Environmental Protection**

The Tea Party is now “wagging the dog” of the Republican Party, Sisson said. So what might generate their support for climate solutions? Sisson’s answer: Solutions that are 1) patriotic, 2) provide pocketbook savings, and 3) reinforce faith values. Tax fossil fuel extraction in America and also imported fossil fuels based on their carbon emissions, then pay the proceeds as a dividend to the American people. Enlist Sarah Palin to be the plan’s star advocate.



#### **Lee Wasserman, Director and Secretary, Rockefeller Family Fund**

Wasserman said the one climate solution Americans will readily buy is a “clean energy rebate.” Tax carbon extraction and imported fossil fuels and give the proceeds directly to the American people. Money in their hands will build support for climate solutions from the grassroots up. To make this solution viable, it must be bipartisan, equitable, require limited bureaucracy, be “politically appealing” to elected officials and tangible to mainstream America. Wasserman suggested, “rebate checks” be delivered monthly to keep Americans keen on green.

## Session II: Discussion Group Priorities

With the large and outside-the-box ideas of these presenters as inspiration, conference participants again broke into eight facilitated table discussions. This time they were asked to answer the question, “What climate solutions can we sell that Americans will buy?”

### VIABLE CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

Participants gave resounding support for **“shifting the subsidies,”** or taking federal money away from fossil fuels and putting it into clean, renewable energy innovation and the hands of the economically beleaguered American people. If not that, at the very least, phasing out and/or eliminating fossil-fuel subsidies to level the playing field for renewables. Ideally, tax dirty energy sources and the pollution they cause, while giving tax incentives for the research and development to take clean-energy sources to scale.

A second favored choice among conference participants was **taxing carbon emissions, with or without a cap, then distributing resulting revenues primarily as a “rebate” or “dividend”** directly to the American people. This would put cash in the pockets of people who need it and redirect their spending to ways that reduce carbon usage - which would help rejuvenate our economy, create new jobs in the clean-energy industry and support the retrofitting of America’s infrastructure for a more sustainable future. These “products” should be promoted via a national “Permanent Trust Fund for America” or “Clean Energy Dividends” campaign.

Another solution that garnered widespread support among participants **was a campaign to market energy efficiency through incentives or competition among communities.** One popular suggestion was a “Race to the Future,” in which states and/or cities would receive federal financial or tax incentives to compete with one another for superiority in energy efficiency, clean-energy use and sustainable development.

Other suggestions from this session included the creation of a “civil conservation corps” to retrofit America for a clean-energy future, a National Climate Service to inform Americans about climate changes and solutions, federal clean energy standards and unified national power grid.

Overall, recommendations from Session II, like those from Session I, emphasized solutions that engage and benefit Americans directly.

## Session III: Inspiring a Change of Atmosphere Strategies & Tactics to Move Forward



**David Yarnold**, President and CEO of the National Audubon Society and ecoAmerica board member, opened Session III by encouraging participants to go beyond framing and messaging to decide how to take America's conversation on climate solutions to scale and make it "real" for all Americans. He asked discussion groups to reach for "breakthrough ideas" on practical programs that will not just reopen national discussion about climate change but "shift existing leadership, organizations and infrastructure to proactive *action* on climate."

The final session of the conference included two rounds of table discussions around 10 topics selected by the participants themselves in a survey they completed prior to the event. By popular vote, they chose to discuss:

- Neutralizing the Deniers
- Communications: What Works Best With Whom?
- Media: Getting the Right Message Out
- Engaging Conservatives in Climate Solutions
- Corporations: Activating Businesses as Climate Solvers
- Health: Activating the Health/Climate Connection
- Engaging People of Color
- Engaging People of Faith
- Activating Baby Boomers
- Empowering Youth Activists

**Deny the Deniers:** Participants recommended taking a more offensive and proactive approach with climate deniers, people who are accepting funding from economic and political interests to distort the truth. The time has come to actively confront, discredit and marginalize them. The best approach is to expose their misrepresentations, contradictions and the corrupt dirty-energy interests of their sponsors. They are especially vulnerable to attacks based on their own values that reveal the harm they do to the security, health and prosperity of America. The American people deserve to know deniers have lied to them and the risks those lies pose to America's climate preparedness and competitive edge in the burgeoning global clean-energy market. Iconic leaders admired by conservatives and spokespeople from the military and the faith community will be most successful at raising the awareness of Americans about how they have been deceived by climate deniers.

**Resonant Messaging:** To convince a majority of Americans that climate change is underway and that preparations and adaptations are necessary, participants recommended messaging that showcases extreme weather events to tell the story of climate change and the risks it poses to people.



The success of this approach depends on engaging members of local communities who have experienced and can communicate the impact of changing seasonal weather patterns and extreme weather, as well as meteorologists who understand and can convey climate truths to the American people. Positive messaging about the benefits of climate preparedness is key. Americans will be motivated by meaningful actions that are doable for them and that create a more stable and competitive economic base for their communities and the nation as a whole. These solutions include energy conservation and innovations in clean, sustainable energy. These resonant messages could find their way into mainstream culture through iconic celebrities pledging actions to get America ready for our shared future.

**Climate-Literate Media:** In order for climate change to become accepted fact and climate solutions a social norm, America needs a more climate-literate media. The media must better understand and communicate that sometimes “balance” is bias – especially when giving equal time or space to a handful of deniers versus the vast majority of institutions and climate scientists – as well as military, epidemiological and national security agencies – that agree that climate change is a real and present danger to America. Disseminating the truth about climate issues will depend on journalists and their editors understanding the simple fact that climate is weather in the aggregate, which means their big weather stories are actually big climate stories. To accomplish this, climate advocates may need a central coordinating institution to ensure media access, allied media outreach and consistent messaging.

**Catalyzing Conservatives:** Conservation is at the core of conservative philosophy and conference participants favored catalyzing conservatives to devise their own messaging to engage their constituencies on climate solutions. This authentic embrace can be achieved if climate advocates work directly with Republican think tanks and thought-leaders to find common ground and a means to make it safe to once again talk about climate publicly. Many aspects of climate solutions speak to the Republican allegiance to competitiveness, national interests, elimination of government subsidies, risk management, fiscal prudence, morality and independence. Furthermore, a carbon fee could appeal to conservative sensibilities if it led to less government intervention and cuts in payroll, income and investment taxes.

**Better Business Through Climate Solutions:** Participants concluded that activating business involvement in climate solutions can be achieved by showcasing the inherent benefits to corporate strategy, brands and cost savings that lead to increased competitiveness and profitability. Climate advocates can catalyze these benefits by finding, mentoring and showcasing business leaders interested in leading a “Race to the Top” for sustainability among high-profile companies and helping to tell their positive stories to the business press. Corporate tax reform based on carbon emissions also would quickly increase profitability from energy efficiency and renewable-energy innovation and use, while diminishing the appeal of the status quo.

**The Climate and Health Connection:** Climate change impacts human health through increased rates and severity of diseases and injuries from storms, floods and wild fires. Participants agreed that the link between climate and human health should be communicated by healthcare providers because they are the most credible and trusted professionals in America and they are beginning to see the effects of climate change on health firsthand. Healthcare professionals can serve as powerful influencers within their enormous networks of suppliers and patients. Successfully engaging the healthcare sector in climate solutions could “make fossil fuels the next tobacco.”

**Engaging People of Color:** Participants noted the dearth of people of color in the climate movement and agreed that engaging this huge population in America is critical to the success of climate solutions. This will require a good deal of listening to ensure the interests, voices, cultures and concerns of this diverse cross-section are reflected in the climate advocacy agenda. Eliciting interest in climate issues from people of color could begin with a communications campaign targeting urban markets and emphasizing the environmental justice and health implications of climate change.

**The Natural Affinity of Faith:** Many in the faith community are already involved in climate solutions, but we have not reached a critical mass among this powerful sector of American society. Most religions have a built-in reverence for nature that lends itself to broad support for climate solutions across faiths. Participants recommended presenting climate solutions as a moral choice with biblical justification for protecting the Creator's earth and "thy neighbor" from the potential ravages of climate change. Additional work needs to be done to educate religious leaders and seminarians on climate issues. Congregations across America could be enlisted to become active and vocal examples of sustainable living for their communities.

**Reactivating Baby-Boomer Activism:** Baby boomers entered adulthood as anti-war activists and environmentalists who shifted a nation, and those lifelong change-the-world values could be reignited for climate solutions. Participants suggested boomers could be called to climate action through their favorite celebrities or a green-retirement planning campaign. They might be asked to manage their estates with concern for their ecological legacies or to use their considerable consumer power to demand more climate-friendly behavior and product choices from corporate America. Their cultural DNA lends itself to "walking the walk" and calling on others to do the same.

**Building the Youth Activist Movement:** The climate movement needs fresh voices, such as those of the young whose future may be defined by climate-caused circumstances. American youth activism is growing but is currently focused on economic issues rather than climate and other environmental concerns. In order to engage this large and growing new group of activists, the climate movement will need to make concerted efforts to include and empower their participation. Over time, improved education in science and technology, along with more opportunities to spend time in nature will ensure that America is growing future generations of climate stewards.

Overall, Session III echoed Sessions I and II in underscoring the necessity to bring new voices and interest groups into the climate movement. The right climate solutions will resonate with and bring myriad economic, social and health benefits to a majority of Americans. The time is right to engage new partners with common interests and empower them to authentically engage their "tribes" in climate solutions through the messages, messengers and incentives that make sense to them. Our job moving forward must focus on open-minded outreach and listening to mentor and empower the American people who, as Lisa Renstrom said, must "carry the torch – their torch."

## A Guide For Now

The **Change of Atmosphere Conference** was designed to produce tangible guidance for catalyzing climate action by better connecting with and engaging Americans. Some participants wanted to “double down” on past strategies and execute them more effectively, while others thought we should use the learnings and develop new strategies to match changed circumstances. Overall, there was a strong consensus that we need to do a much better job of building public support for climate solutions.

- **The climate movement needs a new master plan for solutions in America that will generate support and solve climate-related problems.** Public support can only be built on bold measures that yield tangible benefits for Americans. “Tax and regulate” (cap and trade) is toxic. However, “empower and reward” (a carbon-pollution fee dividend, given not to the government and Wall Street, but to the American people) would reward low carbon use, establish a direct, beneficial connection between people and natural resource use, and motivate common-sense action on climate.
- If we really care about solving the problem more than furthering our individual and organizational interests, **we need better collaboration within the broad eco-climate movement as well as authentic partnerships with other key sectors.** These need to be built on a base of cooperation, reciprocity, shared values and mutual benefit. We need to share knowledge and best practices amongst ourselves and work together toward common goals.
- **We need to do a much better job of connecting with Americans in personally relevant ways.** Just “communicating” our positions with the best framing and words, and delivering them through the right channels and messengers will not be enough. We need to be authentic and provide pragmatic benefits and examples of success that engage, inspire, empower and reward action toward climate solutions.
- **We must market our successes and undermine climate deniers.** Americans respond well and are attracted to demonstrations of success and reject moral aberrations.

In hindsight, we celebrate the birth, maturation and success of both the conservation and environmental movements. We may now be at the point of launching an effective sustainability movement.





# Change of Atmosphere

*Connecting with Americans on Climate*

ecoAmerica  
*start with people*

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ecoAmerica is a non-profit that uses consumer research and strategic partnerships to create large scale engagement programs that build awareness, understanding and action for climate and environmental solutions among mainstream Americans.

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