

A New Direction for the Planet's Sake

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With humanity consuming the planet's natural resources at an increasing rate, governments must demonstrate a much stronger collective commitment to tackling climate change. And with the significant exception of the United States, they generally seem to be getting the message.

MADRID – By July 29, according to the sustainability organization Global Footprint Network, humanity will have used up the Earth's resource budget for the entire year. This "[Earth Overshoot Day](#)" has moved forward by an astonishing two months in the past 20 years and in 2019 it will arrive earlier than ever. Although humanity's increasing environmental impact manifests itself in many ways, climate change has the broadest and longest-lasting effects. Carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels account for an [estimated](#) 60% of our ecological footprint.

The G20 countries are, to different degrees, the main contributors to climate change, and collectively emit [around 80%](#) of all greenhouse gases. China, the United States, and the European Union head the CO₂ emission [rankings](#), with America being by far the biggest *per capita* emitter. Under President Donald Trump, however, the US has announced its withdrawal from the 2015 [Paris climate agreement](#), whereby 197 countries have pledged to limit the increase in the global temperature to a maximum of 2°C above pre-industrial levels.

At the recent G20 summit in Osaka, the Trump administration again distanced itself from the Paris accord, while [claiming](#) that energy-related CO₂ emissions in the US had fallen by 14% between 2005 and 2017. But this drop largely reflected economic factors – particularly access to abundant low-cost natural gas, which has displaced coal in the US energy mix. The Trump administration, which is busy [rolling back](#) Obama-era climate policies, cannot take credit for these trends.

The climate crisis proves that social and natural dynamics are increasingly linked. Yet some leaders still seem intent on ignoring the empirical evidence for global warming. In the US, Trump's climate policies reflect today's sharply polarized politics, where almost every issue is highly partisan. His rejection of the scientific consensus on climate change appeals to many Republican voters, only 34% of whom [believe](#) that human activity is the primary cause of global warming, compared to 89% of Democrats.

Moreover, the US government's offensive against climate science has found support among other fossil-fuel producers. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Russia, for example, [recently joined the US](#) in refusing to back a [landmark report](#) by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that highlighted the need for drastic cuts in CO₂ emissions.

The IPCC report concluded that in order to limit global warming during this century to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels – an aim of the Paris agreement – we must reduce net CO₂ emissions by about half (relative to 2010 levels) by 2030, and we must reach net-zero emissions by mid-century. Current trends, however, are not promising: global energy-related CO₂ emissions climbed to a [record high](#) in 2018.

But it's not all bad news. Fortunately, no country has joined the US by announcing its intention to withdraw from the Paris agreement. And at the G20 summit, France, the

United Kingdom, and others [prevented](#) Trump from keeping any reference to the accord out of the [final communiqué](#).

France and the UK are among a growing number of countries that have [adopted laws](#) enshrining the objective of carbon neutrality (meaning net-zero emissions), in their case by 2050. EU member states – which in 2018 managed to buck the current global trend by [reducing](#) their combined energy-related CO₂ emissions – have discussed the possibility of making carbon neutrality by 2050 a shared objective. But last month they [failed to agree](#) on this target date because of opposition from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, and Poland.

This represents a [setback](#) for Europe ahead of the [UN Climate Action Summit](#) in New York in September, which will address the need for more ambitious national commitments under the Paris agreement. The EU must constantly demonstrate its capacity for leadership on climate change, and failing to make a strong statement at this summit would represent a missed opportunity.

At the same time, the world will not win the battle against climate change if too many people believe that economic growth and fairness will suffer as a result. As the “Yellow Vest” protest movement in France [has shown](#), it is rather unrealistic to expect people who worry about the end of the month to worry just as much about the end of the world.

Because the energy transition [will be costly](#) and generate losers in the short run, governments must fine-tune policies and design a safety net to cushion the impact, as the Spanish government aims to do with its new [transition plan](#) for closing the country’s coal mines. This sort of adjustment – which was [embraced](#) by European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen in her speech at the European Parliament – is compatible with confronting the hard truth of the matter: in the medium and long term, climate *inaction* is by far the more costly alternative.

The earliest ever “Earth Overshoot Day” is a stark reminder of how much we demand from our planet, and of the unprecedented energy transition required to combat global warming. Encouragingly, the public debate on climate change – despite some discordant voices – has begun to recognize this reality. Moreover, the increasing depth and visibility of the climate discussion, and the [marked decrease](#) in renewable energy prices, provide further grounds for optimism.

Tackling global warming will be an arduous task, and it might be easy to become discouraged. But if the world embraces an innovative, multilateral, and socially inclusive spirit, there is still time to bring about the change in direction urgently needed to preserve the planet’s habitability.