

OPINION

# It's not too late to make a difference on the climate crisis

**We can act now with proven tools to cut greenhouse gas emissions and store vastly more carbon in plants and the earth.**

By Frances Moore Lappé Updated April 19, 2021, 3:00 a.m.

Life on our fast-heating planet faces an existential threat. This we know. We're now on track for the worst-case melting of polar glaciers and the resulting sea rise. During the last 15 years, temperatures in the Arctic have [reached levels](#) not predicted for another 70 years.

When we're facing any seemingly overwhelming threat, despair can be our greatest enemy. It can feed denial and stymie action. But we can escape this deadly enemy.

First, we must recognize that it is too late to save those species we've already wiped out at the rate of [nearly 150 each day](#). It is too late to prevent even worse drought, flooding, and generally more extreme weather.

But it's not too late to save at least some of the [million species](#) now facing extinction. We can avoid the worst — if we act now, quickly, with proven tools, to cut greenhouse gas emissions and to store vastly more carbon in plants and the earth.

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It's a message of hope — hope of a certain kind: honest hope that takes it all in. In fact, hope organizes our brains toward solutions. Hope is a form of power.

How, then, do we quickly build such truth-grounded, energizing hope?

Because we humans are social creatures who take our cues from one another, we can spread stories of everyday Americans stepping up to confront the climate crisis.

I put it this way because our country is a prime climate culprit.

Over time, the United States has emitted more CO2 than any other country — since 1751, adding [roughly a quarter](#) of total historical emissions. Today, China and the United States [emit almost half of the world's carbon dioxide](#): In 2020, China released almost 30 percent and the United States 15 percent. But per person we are much worse: Each American adds [more than three times](#) her or his share of the world average.

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Our sad status reflects a damaged democracy and a particularly brutal form of capitalism. Still, numerous states and cities — including unlikely heroes — are seizing the climate challenge.

As of late 2020, more than 1 in 4 Americans — over 100 million of us — lived in places [committed](#) to using 100 percent clean electricity. These places include over 170 cities and towns, more than 10 counties, and eight states, plus Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. All states with clean energy laws now on the books have set mid-century targets for carbon-neutral electricity. To succeed, timetables must be yanked forward, but it is a beginning.

I grew up in Texas, where oil is king, and my home state's leadership on clean energy is an energizing surprise.

Yes, it's true that Texas still produces over a third of the nation's crude oil; and its continuing dependence on oil and gas brought havoc, even death, during this winter's deep freeze. But in the 1990s, an alternative opened when eight utilities used a deliberative opinion poll to shape their direction: Randomly selected citizens were invited to come together to learn about and then weigh energy options.

The results surprised many. Respondents [upped their commitment](#) to renewables and efficiency.

Then in 2002, the Texas Legislature not only amended the state's utility code to allow competition among retail electricity companies but also enacted [state Renewable Portfolio Standards](#). These "standards" — a term more friendly to Texans than "regulation" — required enough clean energy that by 2009 electricity providers collectively supply consumers to power about a [third of a million](#) homes. When it became clear the goal would be met three years early, the Legislature [more than doubled](#) the requirement.

Today, Texas leads the nation, generating [almost 30 percent](#) of total US wind-powered electricity. If it were a country, Texas would be the world's [fifth-largest](#) wind energy producer.

An additional plus?

Because wind turbines use [only 2 percent](#) of the area of a typical farm, Texas farmers collectively earn about a [fifth of a billion dollars](#) yearly by leasing bits of land to the wind industry. Some see wind as “[a stable cash crop that is policy and drought resistant.](#)”

Imagine the possibility. Just three states — Texas, Kansas, and North Dakota — have wind power potential exceeding the electricity used annually by the entire nation.

Another state probably not linked with green energy innovation in the minds of many is Georgia. Although it was reliably “red” for nearly 20 years, in less than a decade Georgia has risen to place in the [top 10 solar-powered states](#), providing 76,000 clean energy jobs.

To make it happen, the Sierra Club and the state’s Tea Party collaborated, and the unusual partnership has been dubbed — get ready — the “Green Tea Party.”

Georgia’s solar power is now on track to provide by 2024 about a fifth of the state’s capacity.

In tackling climate chaos, cities matter greatly — since they produce three-quarters of the world’s carbon emissions. In the United States, over 170 cities and towns have [committed](#) to 100 percent green energy — with [47 already](#) drawing all their electricity from green, renewable sources.

One surprise for me was Washington D.C., which in 2017 became the world’s first [LEED platinum-certified](#) city. LEED — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — is the globally recognized green-building rating system. That year Washington also ranked [number one](#) in the nation for “green roofs.” The city has [3 million square feet](#) of vegetative roofs that capture carbon while mitigating runoff and flooding.

These advances have required smart policy tools. State Renewable Portfolio Standards — what worked for wind in Texas — have been successful across the board. Adopted by 30 states and D.C., the approach gets [credit for almost half](#) the country’s 2002-2019 renewable energy growth.

State collaborative commitments are also helping. An example is the [Northeast Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative](#) involving Massachusetts and nine other states. In the initiative’s first decade, beginning in 2005, CO2 emissions from power plants in member [states fell by 50 percent](#), “outpacing the rest of the country by 90 percent.”

In facing the climate emergency, there’s a lot to build on. True, we can’t turn back the clock, but we can press utilities and government at every level, and with all our might, for the Greenest New Deal.

To act, we humans don’t need certainty of success. What we do need is to see others like ourselves in action and to glimpse even a possibility that we can make a difference.

*Frances Moore Lappé is the author of several books, including “Diet for a Small Planet” and, most recently, “It’s Not Too Late! Crisis, Opportunity, and the Power of Hope.”*