



Anna K. Mebust

What is Congress Doing on Climate Change These Days, Anyway?

My time working for Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) has primarily focused on climate change, a topic for which my scientific training provides a very strong background. In graduate school, I studied how pollutant emissions from wildfires vary as a result of fire conditions, a topic intricately intertwined with climate change. Fire emissions can impact climate: Many of the emitted species directly affect incoming solar radiation, and some also interact with other gases, affect clouds, or participate in other important processes that indirectly influence climate. In turn, climate change can impact fire emissions: In a changing climate, the number, size, and intensity of fires may change, and these factors all influence the amount and composition of the emissions. Climate feedback effects like this one shape the relationship between greenhouse gas emissions and warming, and the accuracy of predictions of future climate depends on our understanding of these processes. Arming policymakers with knowledge about the state of climate science requires an understanding of the complicated nature of some of these relationships, and I brought that background with me to Washington.

There are a number of thorough summaries of global and regional climate science, including GSA's Position Statement on climate, the recently released IPCC Fifth Assessment, and the even more recently released National Climate Assessment, just to name a few. These and many other climate studies agree: our global and regional climate is warming, and human activities are primarily responsible. There is certainly more room for debate within the details; for example, how quickly will the climate warm, what are the specific risks at regional scales, and which policy solutions will best address the problem with limited negative impacts elsewhere. (I will not go into these details here; please refer to the summaries just mentioned.) At the end of the day, however, there is a scientific consensus that anthropogenic climate change exists.

Regardless of this consensus, these days Congress is caught up in what some might call unprecedented gridlock. Legislative movement on any topic, even those considered to be highly bipartisan, is extremely difficult. At this stage, climate change remains a contentious topic here; some members dismiss the scientific consensus entirely, while those who accept it sometimes differ on the "details" I mentioned before, and can disagree about the best way to move forward. Sweeping legislation of any kind is difficult to enact in Congress even in the best of circumstances. In the current environment, the political reality is that major legislation on climate change will not come up anytime soon.

So, what am I doing with my year on the Hill? Legislation on climate change might be off the table, but fortunately for my fellowship experience, that does not mean there is nothing going on. There are plenty of ways for Congress to act without major legislation, and here is a window into some of the strategies I have witnessed being applied to climate change:

1. Use the "bully pulpit" to bring attention to the topic.

Senators occupy a unique position in their ability to generate conversation around an issue; potential strategies include writing letters to each other and other major public figures, holding press conferences, writing op-eds, or giving speeches. In January, some senators announced the formation of a new "Climate Action Task Force" with the explicit purpose of bringing attention to climate change. For the task force's major action thus far, 31 senators came together for a "climate change all-nighter"—after wrapping up the day's business, they continued to speak on the Senate floor about climate change throughout the night. Topics ranged from the scientific evidence supporting climate change, to the effects that senators had witnessed in their own states and elsewhere, to the possible policy strategies that could be used to lower greenhouse gas emissions.

The event was effective as an awareness tool, generating plenty of press coverage as well as a trending Twitter hashtag, #Up4Climate. For me, it was also one of the best experiences of my fellowship so far. I helped the rest of our energy and environment legislative team prepare a speech for my boss, and then I was lucky enough to be able to go to the Senate floor with him and watch him give it. Access to the floor is very restricted; at the beginning of his speech, Senator Sanders had to ask his colleagues for their unanimous consent to give me access. I will never forget hearing my name spoken on the Senate floor, followed by Senator Sanders thanking me for my hard work! In fact, it cannot be forgotten, because those statements are now printed in the Congressional Record. Thanks to this fellowship, incredible opportunities like this one keep coming up, and I am so grateful for them.

2. Work with (or against) the Executive Branch through Congressional oversight.

Congress may be stuck in perpetual gridlock, but agencies within the Executive Branch already have several authorities that they have determined allow them to take several actions on climate change. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency is in the process of issuing carbon dioxide emission regulations for new and existing power plants; the Department of the Interior is expanding permitting for renewable energy, like utility-scale solar, wind, and geothermal power projects, on public lands. Congressional action is not needed for the Executive Branch to undertake these efforts, but Congress still maintains its oversight role over the agencies, and much of their work comes before us during hearings or in other ways. Members have the opportunity to support or to challenge the Executive Branch and to weigh in with what they think are better strategies.

3. Direct federal funding.

When most people think about Congress's role in the government, they typically think about lawmaking. Congress is also responsible for funding the government, however, and this provides several opportunities to generate action within the broader appropriations process. Members who sit on the

appropriations committees are best equipped to act here, but all members play a role in the process and can push funding for the programs they prioritize. Senators often sign letters to the chairs and ranking members of the Senate Appropriations subcommittees (e.g., the Energy and Water subcommittee) in support of particular programs and funding levels for those programs (e.g., the Department of Energy Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy). These letters can support funding levels from the President's budget request, ask for additional funding, or request decreased or eliminated funding. Members take action on climate by helping to direct funding towards (or away) from climate change-related programs that they support (or oppose).

4. Take smaller legislative actions wherever you can.

Despite the extreme partisanship and gridlock that Congress is currently suffering from, there are still some opportunities for small legislative victories, either through bipartisan action or by using the amendment process. Energy efficiency measures often have some bipartisan appeal, for example. There is also some bipartisan support for many types of renewable energy, such as wind and biofuels, from members who represent states or districts with strong resources for those types of energy. This support does

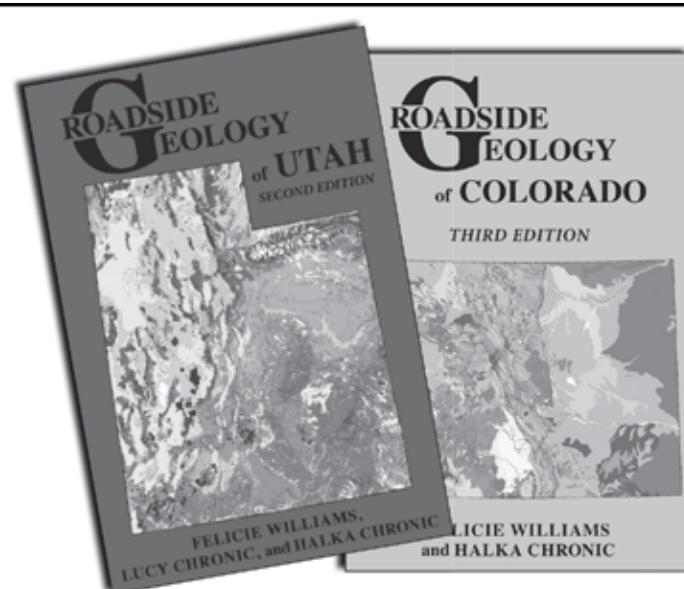
not always lead to legislative action, but it can. For example, a modest, bipartisan energy efficiency bill passed the House in March and is awaiting Senate action. Members also look for opportunities to offer amendments on broader legislation; minor amendments with bipartisan appeal will sometimes pass.

Those are just a few ways that Congress can act on climate change even without major legislation, and a glimpse into my life here on the Hill. Perhaps one day the winds will shift here and legislative action on climate change will no longer be out of reach. In the meantime, I will continue providing my boss with the best science on climate change as he continues to work hard on climate change in all the little ways he can.

This manuscript is submitted for publication by Anna K. Mebust, 2013–2014 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, with the understanding that the U.S. government is authorized to reproduce and distribute reprints for governmental use. The one-year fellowship is supported by GSA and by the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, under Assistance Award No. G13AP00095. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. government. Anna is working in the office of Senator Sanders (I-VT) and can be reached at Anna_Mebust@sanders.senate.gov.



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