



Dispatches From The Wild, Weird World Of Humanity And Its Biosphere

April 28, 2021

## Biden's Virtual Climate Summit

On April 22 and 23, President Joe Biden led a virtual Climate Leaders Summit, in which national leaders around the world conversed and negotiated about climate policy on Zoom. This was Biden's baby, an "extra" climate summit in advance, and meant to build momentum for, the regularly scheduled [annual UN climate talks](#), with 2021's to be held in



Glasgow in November. Early results seem to be mixed to positive: at the very least, the nations of the world have made the best promises yet, with rhetoric coming ever closer to an appropriate, proportionate response to the threat of the climate crisis. Biden led off by setting [a new Nationally Determined Contribution](#) (voluntary emissions reduction goal under the Paris Agreement) for the US; cutting carbon dioxide output 50 to 52% below 2005 levels by 2030. This is America's most ambitious pledge to fight the climate crisis yet (for context: we are broadly on track to meet Obama's NDC pledge of 26-28% below 2005 levels by 2025) and is likely achievable if key elements of Biden's clean infrastructure-rich [American Jobs Plan](#) are passed. (And no, despite the latest hogwash the Republican disinformation sphere is peddling, it has [absolutely nothing to do with limiting the amount of red meat Americans can eat](#)).

The body of the summit was essentially a mishmash of national leaders trying to make what commitments they could on climate change, with the sincerity and depth of those commitments dependent on their personal investment, the power of fossil fuel lobbies in their home countries, and a host of other factors.

[The US announced it would double its international climate financing and triple aid for adaptation](#). Japan announced a new target of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions 46% below 2013 levels by 2030, and Canada announced a target of 40-45% below

2005 levels by 2030. South Korea pledged to stop funding new coal-fired power plants abroad and promised a new 2030 goal later this year. These are all fairly solid targets on the graded-on-a-curve scale climate action gets judged by, but are [substantially less](#) than campaigners had been hoping for.

The EU [super-extra-special-finalized](#) its target of reducing emissions by 55% of more below 1990 levels by 2030, which as part of the [European Green Deal](#) has been percolating for the better part of a year.

Perhaps one of the most consequential statements was the least detailed: [China's autocrat Xi Jinping said](#) ""We will strictly limit the increase in coal consumption over the 14th five-year plan period (2021-2025) and phase it down in the 15th five-year plan period (2026-2030)." China is currently building the most new coal plants and using the most coal of any nation, by a county mile, and any hint of a halt is late but welcome news.

The US, UK, and Norway launched [the LEAF Coalition \(Lowering Emissions through Accelerating Forest finance\)](#), set to mobilize at least \$1 billion in public and private investment to fund countries, states, and provinces' efforts to protect their tropical forests. ([Here's their new website](#)).

Putin is [at least making noise now](#) about the importance of international cooperation to reduce methane leaks from natural gas infrastructure, including within Russia.

[Pakistan is exploring a debt-for-nature plan](#) (this innovative new conservation method has [worked great for the Seychelles](#)) in which creditor nations would forgive some debt to help support Prime Minister Imran Khan's ambitious reforestation efforts.

There were some commitments made at the summit that seemed much more questionable than others. For example, the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Norway, and Canada, together responsible for 40% of the world's oil production, created the "[Net Zero Producers Forum](#)" which discussed ancillary issues like carbon capture without addressing the core issue of leaving oil in the ground, in what could become a classic example of [climate scientists' warnings that "net zero" is becoming industry code for "emit now, promise hazy new technologies to balance it out later."](#) However, this could be a valuable forum for short-term gains on the important issue of [methane leaks](#), a rising contributor to climate change that should be a fairly politically easy one to address as they also represent inefficiency and lost revenue for natural gas producers.

All in all, this climate summit was as great a success as it could possibly have been. The world's leaders did not miraculously discover the fortitude or political will to muster the all-out, civilization-wide response that is needed to address the climate crisis, but they never have before, and they came closer this time than in any previous meeting, with stronger commitments, new partnerships, and new ideas moving into the mainstream. And, of course, this gets a lot of work done in advance of the Glasgow summit in November. Good news!



At a summit where even China and Saudi Arabia touted their new climate goals, there was one glaring exception to the new international spirit of at least paying lip service to the drastic need for climate action: Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil. (We don't want to put up a picture of Bolsonaro, so here's a Brazilian flag).



The notoriously [pro-deforestation](#), [violently racist, sexist, and homophobic](#), and [arguably sociopathic](#) Brazilian president acted like a Bond supervillain holding the planet for ransom. That sounds hyperbolic, but his actions bear out the description. At the virtual summit, Bolsonaro demanded that Biden and America pay the Brazilian government to enforce their own environmental protection laws, citing both a [sleight-of-hand "carbon trick" method of calculating emissions reductions that makes Brazil appear to have made more progress than it actually has](#) and the genuine environmental progress that Brazil has made over the past 15 years but which Bolsonaro has done his best to reverse in the last two. (See chart: Bolsonaro took office in the beginning of 2019). His environment minister Ricardo Salles [outlined the precise grift](#): Bolsonaro wants \$10 billion a year in "foreign aid." If there was a chance that this money could actually help the Amazon, this would be a superb deal-but Salles clarified that in exchange for this, Brazil would just be reducing the rate of Amazon deforestation by 30 to 40 percent. Not stopping deforestation, not replanting a single tree, not putting into place any new legal protections or protected areas or community-based efforts-just mildly slowing down the destruction, perhaps by putting just a little more effort into enforcing the existing Brazilian environmental laws that [Bolsanaro has consistently encouraged illegal loggers, ranchers, and land-grabbers to disobey](#). Fortunately, and entirely unsurprisingly, Biden made clear that the US will not be handing over money to be spent for unknown purposes in exchange for unaccountable

Eventually, Bolsonaro made woolly commitments to "reduce deforestation"-and then the very next day, [signed a budget that slashed funding for Brazil's Ministry for the Environment to an extent that will likely make it impossible for them to even properly monitor deforestation, let alone try to stop it](#). The man is a menace, perhaps the single most damaging and harmful human being on the planet.

Frankly, it was a struggle to write this: Bolsonaro's statements and actions are so depraved that even describing them makes this article itself sound unhinged. The good news is that there is a lot of resistance building in Brazil and the international community. the EU has [spiked a potentially massive trade agreement](#) over Bolsonaro's destructive policies. [Twenty-three](#) out of Brazil's twenty-seven state governors [signed a letter](#) to Biden requesting that he deal directly with them to stop deforestation. It's unclear if that's even legally possible, but that's still an astonishing rebuke-imagine if 44 out of the 50 US states wrote to China or the EU asking to work around a sitting president. And Bolsonaro's up for reelection in 2022; with Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a highly popular, liberal, and pro-environment former Brazilian president, [now legally eligible to run against him](#) after being cleared of ([likely politically motivated](#)) corruption charges. Here's hoping Bolsonaro goes the way of Trump-to the ash heap of history.



## US State-Level Progress.

As the nation-level leaders held forth, setting new goals that may or may not bear fruit, several US states took Earth Day as an opportunity to announce more concrete, immediate action. On April 22, [Maine's own Janet Mills announced the Maine Clean Energy Innovation Challenge, a \\$500,000 grant program](#) set to support at least two new clean energy startups in the Pine Tree State. (Pictured: Governor Mills on Earth Day at a ReVision Energy facility).



After a decade of failed attempts, Washington State's legislature [passed a landmark cap-and-trade bill \(with extra-strong emissions reduction requirements\)](#), joining California and a [regional grouping of twelve Northeastern states \(including Maine!\)](#) in adopting the [highly effective, market-based](#) emissions reduction tactic. And on April 23rd, California Governor Gavin Newsom [ordered state agencies to ban the issuance of any new fracking permits by 2024](#) and assess how the state could end all oil and gas production by 2045. If this works out-or if some proposed legislative measures go even further-it will set the ever-innovative Golden State on the path to becoming the first US state to end all fossil fuel production. Great news!

## Malaria Vaccine.

This news item isn't strictly within our newsletter's climate and environment-focused bailiwick, but it's so awesome we just had to include it.

Malaria, a disease caused by a parasite transmitted through mosquitoes, is one of humanity's deadliest enemies, responsible for the deaths of untold millions throughout history and to this day killing over 400,000 people a year, most of them children in poor tropical countries. [Now, a new trial of a vaccine developed at Oxford has found 74 to 77% effectiveness in preventing malaria among a cohort of toddlers in Burkina Faso.](#) There are still lots of medical questions to be answered, but this is a huge step forward, and could save countless lives in the future!

## The Weekly Anthropocene

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