

CLIMATE

Climate Action Is Renewal

Cleaner air, lower costs, better jobs, safer homes, and communities strong enough to withstand the weather we already have. The proof is in your lungs and your electric bill.

PILLAR 5 · CLIMATE RENEWAL AND REGIONAL RESILIENCE

AT A GLANCE

The problem

On the order of 200,000 air-pollution deaths a year from the same combustion driving warming, and emissions far off track.

The proposal

Build the clean economy, cut methane fast, price pollution with dividends, make producers own their waste, prepare for the climate already here.

Cost & funding

Pollution pricing raises revenue; dividends protect households; prevention is cheaper than recovery.

Evidence strength

Strong on health co-benefits (peer-reviewed); individual instruments vary by design and are labeled.

Principal risk

Regressivity if the dividend fails in practice; honesty about overshoot is load-bearing.

Success looks like

Emissions falling, air-quality deaths falling, prevention spending ahead of recovery spending.

Summary

Climate action has been sold to Americans as sacrifice, a list of things to give up now for a payoff that is distant, global, and abstract. That framing is wrong, and the evidence says so plainly. The largest returns on climate action are immediate, local, and measurable in human health: burning fossil fuels warms the planet and fouls the air people breathe right now, causing on the order of 200,000 premature deaths a year in the United States, and study after study finds the health savings from cleaner air alone can exceed the cost of the policy that delivered them.

This brief runs in two movements, mitigation and resilience, held together by the emissions math and the health lens. Build the clean economy: deploy clean energy and the jobs that come with it, electrify and weatherize homes, cut methane because it is the fastest lever we have, decarbonize the hard industrial core, and protect workers through the transition. Keep the emissions spine honest, including about overshoot, with carbon removal as a backstop and not a permit. And prepare for the climate we already have: prevention over recovery, hardened infrastructure with heat treated as the health emergency it is, and local resilience in every community. The cheapest disaster is the one we prevent.

The Principle

Climate action has been sold to Americans as sacrifice, a list of things to give up now for a payoff that is distant, global, and abstract. That framing is wrong, and the evidence says so plainly. The largest returns on climate action are not distant and they are not abstract. They are immediate, local, and measurable in human health.

Burning fossil fuels does two things at once. It warms the planet, and it fouls the air people breathe right now. Air pollution from human activity causes on the order of 200,000 premature deaths a year in the United States, and some estimates run higher, most of it from the same combustion that drives warming. So when you cut those emissions, you are not only slowing a change that arrives over decades. You are preventing heart attacks, asthma attacks, and early deaths in the next few years, in the communities doing the cutting. Study after study finds that the health savings alone can exceed both the climate benefit and the cost of the policy that delivered them. This is the whole reframe, and it is not spin. Climate action is renewal because the renewal shows up now: in air you can breathe, bills you can afford, jobs that stay here, and homes and towns that can take a hit and keep going.

There is also proof this scale of repair can be done, because humanity has already done it once. The Montreal Protocol phased out the chemicals destroying the ozone layer; nearly 99 percent of them are gone from production, and the ozone layer is on track to recover fully, around 2040 for most of the world and 2066 over Antarctica. The same treaty's Kigali Amendment, phasing down climate-heating refrigerants, is projected to avoid 0.3 to 0.5 degrees Celsius of warming by 2100, one of the largest single acts of climate mitigation ever taken. Planetary-scale environmental repair is not a hope. It is a documented capability.

That gives this pillar two jobs, and a single logic that ties them together. Build the clean economy that lowers emissions and lowers costs. Prepare for the climate we already have, because the disasters are here and the cheapest disaster is the one we prevent. And judge every plank in both by the same question a public-health officer would ask: what does this do for the health, safety, and pocketbook of a real person, this year, in this place. The climate math matters, and this brief keeps it honest. But the reason to act does not wait for the thermometer.

The System Failure

Three failures compound each other.

First, we have underbuilt the clean economy. Families pay more than they should for energy, we ceded manufacturing jobs we could have kept, and we did it even as clean energy and storage became the cheapest power in much of the country. The gap is not technological anymore. It is a failure to build.

Second, we have measured climate by the wrong clock and missed the bill we are already paying. The public debate fixates on a global temperature in 2100 while the health cost of dirty air is charged every single year, in emergency rooms and cemeteries, and falls hardest on the communities living closest to the smokestacks and the highways. Treating climate as a far-off, planetary problem has hidden the near, personal, and unequal damage that is happening now.

Third, we are dangerously exposed to the weather we already get. Storms, floods, fire, and heat are hitting harder and reaching places once considered safe, and far too much of our spending comes after the disaster, in recovery, rather than before it, in prevention that costs a fraction as much. Heat in particular is the deadliest weather hazard in the country, and it kills quietly, mostly poor and elderly people without cooling.

Underneath all three is a brittleness problem. We leaned on big, centralized systems, a far-away grid, globe-spanning supply chains, food that travels thousands of miles, and we hollowed out the local systems that let a community look after itself when the big systems fail.

And the honest scoreboard on the emissions themselves is grim, which is exactly why the co-benefit case matters so much. The IPCC's math for holding warming near 1.5°C required global emissions to peak before 2025 and fall about 43% by 2030 from 2019 levels, with methane down about a third, reaching net-zero CO2 in the early 2050s. We are nowhere close. The 2025 Emissions Gap Report puts the world on track for roughly 2.8°C under current policies, emissions hit a record high in 2024, and 1.5°C is now likely to be breached, at least temporarily, within about a decade. A plank that pretends otherwise is not credible. The point of leading with health is that the case for action does not collapse when the global number slips, because the local payoff is real either way.

The Proposal

The work runs in two movements, mitigation and resilience, held together by one spine, the emissions math, and one lens, the health and cost payoff that makes it worth doing regardless.

Renewal: Build the Clean Economy

1. **Deploy clean energy and the jobs that come with it.** Build out clean power, storage, transmission, and domestic clean manufacturing, and pair it with real apprenticeships and training so the jobs are good ones that stay in the country. The aim is lower bills, a stronger industrial base, and cleaner air, not only lower emissions. The health return here is not automatic, which the evidence is clear about: capturing it means strategically retiring the dirtiest plants and pairing deployment with pollution controls, and targeting the communities breathing the worst air first. Everyone gets cleaner air. The most burdened places get the deepest cleanup.
2. **Electrify and weatherize homes so families pay less and breathe easier.** Help households move to efficient heating, cooling, and appliances and seal up leaky homes, aiming the deepest help at the families with the highest bills and the worst housing. This is climate policy that arrives as a smaller utility bill and a home that stays livable in a heat wave.

3. **Cut methane, because it is the fastest, cheapest lever we have.** Methane warms hard and fast and then leaves the atmosphere, which means cutting it slows warming within years, not decades. The IPCC calls for roughly a third less methane by 2030, and analysts find that cutting methane alongside tripling renewables and doubling efficiency could slow the rate of warming by about a third within ten years. Plug the leaks in oil and gas systems, capture it at landfills and large farms, and enforce it. No serious climate plank in 2026 can leave methane out.
4. **Decarbonize the hard stuff, not just the easy stuff.** The IPCC is blunt that this is impossible without deep cuts across all sectors, and the clean-power story leaves out the industrial core: steel, cement, chemicals, heavy transport, aviation, and shipping. Use public purchasing power and clean-industrial investment to bring low-carbon materials and processes to scale, which ties directly to the clean-construction standard in the build agenda. The jobs in these sectors are exactly the good, place-rooted jobs a just transition is supposed to protect.
5. **Protect workers and communities through the transition.** Where the energy economy changes, invest first and deepest in the workers and towns most affected, with new industry, retraining, and revenue, so the transition is done with these communities rather than to them.

The Emissions Spine and an Honest Word About Overshoot

6. **Commit to the math, and tell the truth about the gap.** Adopt a national emissions trajectory tied to the real marks, a steep cut this decade on the path to net-zero by 2050, and report progress against it honestly rather than against a friendlier baseline. Where current policy misses, say so. Credibility here is worth more than optimism.
7. **Treat carbon removal as a backstop, not a permit.** The IPCC finds that some carbon dioxide removal is unavoidable to cancel out the residual emissions from sectors we cannot fully clean up in time. Build that capacity honestly, and frame it exactly as what it is: a backstop for the last hard tons, not a license to keep emitting. The job is to make any overshoot of 1.5°C temporary and minimal, because every fraction of a degree and every year of overshoot means more damage, higher adaptation costs, and heavier reliance on removal that is still costly and uncertain. This is the emergency-management instinct applied to the atmosphere: minimize the exposure, do not gamble on a cleanup you have not proven you can afford.

Resilience: Prepare for the Climate We Have

8. **Invest in prevention, not just recovery.** Fund pre-disaster mitigation at scale, the unglamorous work of elevating, hardening, relocating, and protecting before the storm, because it is among the highest-return spending government does. Restore and durably fund the federal pre-disaster mitigation program, and make that commitment survive the next political swing rather than depend on it.
9. **Harden the infrastructure people depend on, and treat heat as the health emergency it is.** Strengthen the grid, water systems, roads, and bridges against the conditions we now face, and build in redundancy so a single failure does not cascade. And plan for heat directly, because it kills more Americans than any other weather hazard: cooling, tree canopy, drainage, cool roofs, and honest risk maps that tell people the truth. Heat adaptation is not comfort policy. It is mortality policy.
10. **Build local resilience into every community, and count it as health infrastructure.** The piece large projects miss is the local one. Support regional food systems so a broken supply chain does not empty the shelves, distributed energy and microgrids so a neighborhood can keep its lights and its clinic running when the main grid goes down, and cooling and warming centers and resilience hubs people can reach on foot. Fund the local emergency capacity, mutual-aid networks, and community institutions that do the real work in the first hours of a disaster. These are not soft extras. They are survival infrastructure, and they are cheap compared to what their absence costs in lives.

Waste Is a Design Choice: Make the Producer Own the End of the Product

Start with the honest numbers, because the recycling story most Americans grew up inside is not the system they actually live in. Of all the plastic ever produced worldwide, about 9 percent has been recycled; 79 percent sits in landfills or the environment.¹ The United States recycled 8.7 percent of its plastic in 2018, the most recent year the EPA published the figure, and even that counted exported material as recycled.² And what does get recycled is mostly downcycled: mechanical recycling degrades plastic with each pass, so a bottle becomes carpet fiber or park-bench filler on its way to the landfill it was always headed for, while virgin plastic, a fossil fuel product, keeps flowing in at the top. The fragments are now inside us. The first biomonitoring study to look for microplastics in human blood found quantifiable particles in 17 of 22 healthy adults tested.³ A system this far from its brochure is not a recycling system. It is a waste system with good marketing.

The marketing was deliberate, and the platform names it precisely because the receipts are public. Keep America Beautiful, founded in 1953 by the American Can Company and Owens-Illinois Glass and later joined by Coca-Cola, ran the famous 1971 “Crying Indian” ad that taught Americans litter was a personal failing, while environmental groups resigned from its advisory council over its work against bottle bills. Decades later, industry insiders said the strategy out loud to NPR and PBS Frontline: the former head of the plastics industry’s own lobby explained that if the public believed recycling was working, “they are not going to be as concerned about the environment,” even as internal industry documents doubted plastic recycling could ever be made economically viable.⁴ BP ran the same play on carbon, hiring an ad agency in 2004 to popularize the personal “carbon footprint” so the ledger would read as yours rather than theirs. And California’s 2024 suit against ExxonMobil alleges the current version: marketing “advanced recycling” while, per the complaint, 92 percent of the plastic processed became fuel that was burned, not new plastic.⁵ Those courtroom claims are allegations, not adjudicated findings, and this platform labels them as such; the fifty-year pattern they sit inside is documented history. The play is always the same: move the responsibility for waste onto the person holding the wrapper and away from the company that designed the wrapper.

So the fix follows from the diagnosis: responsibility returns to the producer. Extended producer responsibility for packaging, where the companies that put material into the world fund the systems that take it back and answer for real targets, is already law in seven states: Maine, Oregon, Colorado, California, Minnesota, Maryland, and Washington. The platform's position is a national floor built on what those states prove out. Pair it with a national deposit-return system, the most proven tool in the drawer: the ten bottle-bill states far out-recycle the rest, the two with a ten-cent deposit lead them all, and Michigan's redemption rate averaged above 90 percent for decades,⁶ though rates across deposit states have slipped since the pandemic and need the same maintenance any system needs. Add truth in labeling, so the chasing-arrows symbol can only appear on products actually recycled at scale, and honest accounting that counts material as recycled only when it becomes material again, not when it is exported or burned as fuel.

The deepest fix is upstream, which is exactly why producer responsibility is the right lever: once a company owns the end of its product, it finally has a reason to design a better product. That means refill and reuse systems, standardized returnable containers, glass where it serves, and public research into bio-based materials, including hemp-derived plastics, carried honestly as evaluation-gated bets rather than proven substitutes at scale, the same discipline this platform applies to every promising-but-unproven option. What would change our position here: if the state producer-responsibility programs now coming online fail to raise real, measured recycling and reuse rates over their implementation windows, the answer is to redesign the mechanism, not to retreat into the fiction that a person sorting into a blue bin can fix a system engineered upstream of them.

Implementation Pathway

The clean-economy agenda runs through federal investment, tax policy, and standards, much of it already in motion, but it is bottlenecked by something the standard platform ducks: we cannot build fast enough. Clean energy that cannot get connected lowers nobody's bill, and the binding constraints now are permitting timelines, transmission that takes a decade to site, and interconnection queues years deep. Permitting and transmission reform are therefore not a side issue, they are load-bearing, and they connect directly to the build agenda. Methane and industrial standards run through federal rules and procurement. Mitigation and resilience run through federal funding delivered to states, regions, and localities, where preparedness actually happens, and the public-health capacity this leans on is the same capacity the foundations pillar builds. The local-resilience agenda is the most decentralized of all, federal and state dollars supporting capacity built and run close to the ground. Coordination is the federal job: only national power can finance this at scale, set standards, and respond when a disaster exceeds any one community. The resilience itself lives locally.

Funding and Public-Value Logic

This is some of the best-returning money a government can spend, and the co-benefit evidence is why. Reviews of the decarbonization literature repeatedly find that the monetized health benefits of cleaner air, fewer deaths and hospitalizations, can offset the cost of the climate policy on their own, before counting a single dollar of avoided climate damage, and typically exceed the cost of the clean electricity that produced them. Pre-disaster mitigation pays back several times over in avoided damage, and every major flood, fire, and storm makes that math more lopsided. Electrification and efficiency lower bills, so the household feels the return directly. Local resilience is cheap relative to the cost of a community that cannot feed, power, or cool itself in a crisis.

So the public value here is unusually easy to state and unusually hard to argue with. It is measured in premature deaths that never happen, asthma attacks that never send a kid to the ER, bills that fall, jobs that stay, and disasters that never become catastrophes. Framing climate as renewal is not messaging. It is an accurate description of what these investments do, and the receipts are in the health data.

Risks and Guardrails

The health co-benefit is real but it is not automatic, and the evidence is explicit on this. Cutting CO2 anywhere helps the climate, but the air-quality and mortality payoff depends on retiring the dirtiest sources and controlling pollution, and on aiming that cleanup at the most exposed communities, since carbon cuts alone do not close the racial and economic gaps in who breathes the worst air. So the guardrail is to design for health and equity deliberately, not to assume they fall out of decarbonization on their own. The just-transition plank has to be funded rather than promised, or the workers and towns it names will rightly stop believing it. The overshoot framing has to stay honest, minimizing and shortening the overshoot rather than treating removal as an escape hatch. And the balance between big infrastructure and local capacity has to be kept, because a plan that pours concrete while letting community capacity wither will fail the next time the concrete does.

Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on health, cost, emissions, and resilience, in that order, because that order is the argument.

- Premature deaths and hospitalizations avoided from cleaner air, tracked especially in the most burdened communities, and progress toward air-quality standards.
- Heat-related deaths and illness, and the share of vulnerable residents within reach of cooling and resilience hubs.

- Household energy bills, especially for lower-income families, and homes weatherized and electrified.
 - Emissions against the stated national trajectory, methane specifically, and clean-energy and clean-industry capacity built, with the transition regions tracked by name.
 - The ratio of money spent on prevention to money spent on recovery, and disaster losses avoided.
 - Local-resilience capacity in place: food systems, microgrids and backup power, accessible cooling, and trained local emergency and mutual-aid networks.
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Opposition and Responses

Some will say climate action kills jobs and raises costs. The opposite is the design. This agenda lowers energy bills, creates domestic jobs that cannot be offshored, and its health savings alone can exceed its cost. The families who save the most on bills, and who breathe the biggest air-quality gains, are the lower-income households paying the most today.

Some will say it is sacrifice now for benefits we will never see. This is the myth the health evidence kills. The largest returns are near-term and local, not distant and global. Cleaner air prevents deaths and illness in the next few years, in the communities doing the work. You do not have to wait for 2100 to get paid.

Some will say 1.5 is dead, so why bother spending. Because every fraction of a degree and every year of overshoot means more damage and more cost, and because the health and bill savings accrue no matter what the global thermometer does. Giving up is the one strategy guaranteed to maximize the harm, and it forfeits a health dividend that has nothing to do with the international number.

Some will say resilience and mitigation are too expensive. Recovery is the expensive option. We already spend enormous sums cleaning up after disasters we could have blunted for a fraction of the cost, and every prevented catastrophe is money and lives saved. The cheapest disaster is the one we prevent.

Some will say this is federal overreach. Coordination is exactly what only the federal government can provide, financing resilience at scale, setting standards, and responding when a crisis outstrips local capacity. The resilience itself is built locally, in communities, which is the opposite of a distant program imposed from above.

Some will say markets will handle the transition. Markets are already making clean energy cheap, which is welcome. But markets do not on their own protect the workers a transition displaces, capture the health co-benefits for the communities that need them most, or build the local resilience a community needs, and those are public responsibilities.

What Would Change Our Position

The health co-benefits frame rests on the air-pollution mortality literature; if that evidence were revised sharply downward, the brief's central reframe would weaken and the case would rest more on direct climate damages, stated at their EPA-estimated value. If fee-and-dividend in practice failed to cut emissions where implemented, or the dividend failed to protect lower-income households despite the design, the pricing plank would be rebuilt around standards and public investment. If methane charges produced no abatement response from operators, the fee was set wrong. The commitment is to the outcome, cheaper energy and fewer deaths, not to any single instrument.

Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. Climate action is not about what you have to give up. It is cleaner air in your lungs this year, a lower power bill this winter, good jobs that stay here, and a town that can take a hit and keep going. The pollution that heats the planet is the same pollution filling emergency rooms right now, so cleaning it up saves lives today, in your community, before it ever touches the global thermometer. So build the clean economy that lowers costs and creates work, cut the methane that is the fastest thing we can do, and get ready for the weather we already have, because we spend a fortune cleaning up after disasters we could have prevented for far less. And remember that resilience is not just big infrastructure. It is cooling centers, backup power, local food, and neighbors who look out for each other. Climate action is renewal. The cheapest disaster is the one we prevent.

SOURCES

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