

# Media Briefing



**Friends of  
the Earth**

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## THE BIG ASK

### **The Big Ask Campaign**

The Big Ask is about individuals putting pressure on the Government to do more to tackle climate change now. Climate change is the biggest threat facing our future and urgent action is needed to cut climate change emissions. We want people to put pressure on their MPs to take action now. They can do this by logging on to [www.thebigask.com](http://www.thebigask.com)

The Big Ask Campaign is calling for a new law to commit the Government to reduce the UK's carbon dioxide emissions by three per cent every year to make it meet its target of a 60 per cent reduction by 2050. If the Government takes action now, it will be easier and more affordable.

As part of the campaign, people will also ask the Government difficult questions about why it hasn't made it cheaper and easier for us to reduce our own emissions and why the Government hasn't given more encouragement to companies to clean up their emissions as well.

The campaign is focusing on the Government because it can make the biggest difference when it comes to tackling climate change by introducing new laws, using taxation and putting in place measures that encourage industry to opt for a cleaner future in the UK.

### **Why we must tackle climate change**

Climate change is the most serious threat facing humanity. The gradual rise in temperatures resulting from greenhouse gas pollution is putting our future and the future of other species at risk. Global warming already kills 160,000 people every year. In England and Wales more than 4 million people are at risk from flooding.

Extreme climate events are becoming more frequent with an increased risk of heat waves, flooding, freak storms and hurricanes. In 2003, the European heat wave resulted in 26,000 premature deaths and cost an estimated \$13.5 billion. Sea levels are already rising and forecasters predict they will rise by a further 88cm by 2100 threatening the homes of 100 million people around the world.

The major cause of climate change is the increased level of man-made greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere, particularly carbon dioxide.

Scientists say that levels of carbon emissions must peak and then decline within the next 10-15 years if we are to limit the change in temperatures to an increase of no more than two degrees centigrade. A rise of more than two degrees could lead to devastating environmental damage and human suffering.

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Contact:

Friends of the Earth Press Office 020 7566 1649



Media contact 020 7566 1649 (24 hour) Fax 020 7490 0881 Email [press@foe.co.uk](mailto:press@foe.co.uk) Website [www.foe.co.uk](http://www.foe.co.uk)  
Friends of the Earth Limited Registered in London No 1012357

26-28 Underwood Street London N1 7JQ

Levels of carbon dioxide are already higher now than at any time in the last 400,000 years. And because carbon molecules survive in the atmosphere for 100 – 200 years, tackling global warming requires action now if future generations are not to continue to pay the price.

Carbon dioxide emissions in the UK have also risen in recent years, with the main sources coming from power stations, industry and transport.

### **Why a new law is needed**

All the major political parties support a cut in climate emissions, yet despite their fine words UK levels of carbon dioxide emissions are still rising. There are many obstacles to political action to tackle emissions, including the vested interests of some of those sectors responsible.

Friends of the Earth believes these can be overcome by a new law that commits the Government to a realistic programme of gradual emissions reduction that will tackle the problem without requiring drastic cuts in any sector at any stage.

The UK is already committed to reducing carbon emissions by 20 per cent by 2010 and by 60 per cent by 2050 based on 1990 levels. But the Government has not identified how these targets will be met and keeps delaying action as it comes under pressure from industry lobby groups and other sectors.

The Climate Change Bill contains a framework to deliver annual emissions reductions of three per cent every year, with action taken across government departments, enforced by the Prime Minister. The Bill would also hand new powers to Parliament to impose sanctions on Government Ministers who fail to meet their targets.

Because concentrations of carbon dioxide are determined by the total volume over time, the earlier we start to make cuts, the less impact there will be in future years.

By making a legally binding commitment to cutting emissions, the Government will be in a position to encourage individuals to take action to cut carbon emissions in their own lives, adding to efforts to reduce the impacts of climate change. The Prime Minister will also be in a better position to take a lead in international efforts to find a global solution to tackling climate change.

### **How to achieve three per cent?**

The Climate Change Bill commits the Government to cutting three per cent of carbon emissions each year. This will ensure that the UK can meet its targets and stabilise emissions in the long term.

To achieve cuts of three per cent, action will be needed across all sectors. Friends of the Earth wants the Government to introduce annual reporting on carbon dioxide emissions, sector by sector, with a view to setting a carbon dioxide budget which will be reviewed every year.

Following consultation, targets should be set for carbon dioxide emissions across the economy. These targets must be effective, but should also take into account factors such as international competition.

Friends of the Earth's research suggests that cuts of 40 per cent are needed in the power sector by 2010, with rapid action to close down the most polluting coal-fired power stations by 2008; and cuts of 12 per cent in emissions from road transport by 2020.

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In areas such as the commercial sector, there is potential for relative easy cuts in emissions (a target of 25 per cent by 2010 is suggested) as little effort has been made to improve the energy efficiency of commercial and institutional premises; but in other areas such as road transport, cuts are likely to require fiscal measures that penalize gas guzzlers and encourage the use of cleaner technologies.

As well as ensuring a three per cent cut in UK emissions, the Government should use its influence overseas to facilitate the take up of clean technologies in the developing world, particularly in countries such as India and China where demand is growing fast.

For more information see Friends of the Earth's briefing on Tackling Climate Change – a twelve point plan for the Government at [www.foe.co.uk/resource/media\\_briefing/twelve\\_point\\_plan](http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/media_briefing/twelve_point_plan)

### **MPs supporting the Bill**

The Climate Change Bill has already received the backing of a large number of MPs from all three main parties. For an up-to-date list contact the press office at Friends of the Earth.

## **WHAT IS CLIMATE CHANGE?**

### **What is climate change?**

Since 1900, average global temperatures have risen by 0.7 degrees centigrade. The 10 warmest years on record have all occurred within the last 15 years with 1998 the warmest year on record in the last 150 years. Scientists have linked this warming to increased levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and say that human activities, such as burning fossil fuels, are responsible.

The problem arises because when fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas are burnt they release carbon dioxide. Greenhouse gases trap the sun's heat in the atmosphere raising temperatures. Even very small changes in temperature lead to bigger impacts, as polar ice caps melt leading to rising sea levels.

The rise in temperature is already changing the world's weather with more extreme weather events such as floods and storms. Scientists have used computer modelling to predict the impact of rising levels of greenhouse gases and say that as emissions increase the changes in the world's climate are likely to become more extreme. They say that carbon emissions need to start falling within the next 10-15 years if we are to prevent average global temperatures rising by more than two degrees centigrade.

### **Damaging wildlife**

These changes in the climate also hit eco-systems – on a planet where wildlife and natural habitat is already being squeezed. According to the UK Environment Agency: "*Climate change could be the coup de grace, triggering a planet-wide extinction of species similar to that of 65 million years ago when an asteroid struck the Earth.*"

Small changes in temperature are already affecting eco-systems, changing the food supply chain for wildlife and putting species at risk. Melting ice in the Arctic is affecting ice floes, making it harder for polar bears to hunt for seals and fish. Forest wildlife is under threat from the increased risk of forest fires. Marine scientists have observed changes in marine biodiversity, with species moving to colder regions as ocean temperatures rise.

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## **Climate change and the developing world**

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that while developed countries like the US and Europe will be able to cope more easily with changes in our climate, the developing world will suffer more. Rising temperatures will make some regions uninhabitable as farmland turns to desert and water sources dry up. Famine in Africa is likely to become more frequent. Within 25 years, major water shortages will afflict 5 billion people, especially in southern Africa, around the Mediterranean and in central Asia.

Rising temperatures will also bring other risks, including the spread of disease such as malaria and dengue fever. Tropical countries without good sanitation will be more vulnerable to water-borne diseases such as cholera. Heat-stress will pose a potentially fatal threat to those without air-conditioning.

Rising sea levels, higher rainfall and more extreme weather conditions will lead to an increased risk of landslides and flooding, putting hillside, coastal and delta settlements at risk. According to the IPCC *"the impact of climate change will fall disproportionately upon developing countries and the poor persons within all countries."*

## **Climate change and the G8**

The Prime Minister Tony Blair has said that climate change and Africa are the top priorities for this year's G8 annual summit meeting which he will host at Gleneagles in Scotland from 6-8 July (see [www.g8.gov.uk](http://www.g8.gov.uk)).

In his online welcome he wrote:

*"Climate change is a global problem that needs addressing now for the sake of future generations. The science is well established and the dangers clear. For example, the number of people worldwide at risk of flooding has increased twenty-fold since the 1960s.*

*"No country can tackle climate change on its own. But there are actions that we can take together to lessen its impact without altering our essential way of life or jeopardising economic prosperity. It is crucial to every country in the world that we establish a consensus now on the nature of the problem and what actions we can take. Again it is the world's richer, industrialised countries - the G8 - that have to take the lead."*

Friends of the Earth is concerned that although Tony Blair has highlighted the key problems facing the future of the world, he has failed to put forward solutions which will tackle the problem. What is more, the UK has also failed to control its own greenhouse gas emissions in the face of powerful industry lobby groups. It has also continued to use financial institutions, such as the World Bank, to fund fossil fuel extraction overseas. As one of the largest historic emitters of greenhouse gases, it needs to show the way by reducing UK carbon dioxide emissions year on year. That is why The Big Ask is needed, to put the UK economy on to a sustainable track.

## **Climate change and the public**

Many people are already asking what they can do to tackle climate change. While Friends of the Earth welcomes action by individuals to reduce their impact on the planet, we believe that Government action is needed if carbon emission targets are to be met. That is why we are asking people to lobby their MP on the need for a Climate Change Bill.

But we can all do more to reduce our personal level of carbon dioxide emissions. Energy efficiency measures in the home can save energy and so reduce emissions. Reducing car use and avoiding

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flights where possible will reduce your transport emissions. Buying locally grown and produced food reduces the need to transport it around the world.

Friends of the Earth can provide tips and advice on how to reduce your personal carbon emissions. For more information, see [www.foe.co.uk/living/](http://www.foe.co.uk/living/).

### Useful links

[www.thebigask.com](http://www.thebigask.com)

UK Climate Impacts Programme:

[www.ukcip.org.uk/climate\\_change/default.asp](http://www.ukcip.org.uk/climate_change/default.asp)

[www.ukcip.org.uk/climate\\_change/by\\_location.asp](http://www.ukcip.org.uk/climate_change/by_location.asp)

Environment Agency:

[www.environment-agency.gov.uk/yourenv/639312/](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/yourenv/639312/)

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - [www.ipcc.ch/](http://www.ipcc.ch/)

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change - <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>

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