



Obama Gives Sober Assessment of Climate Change But Defends Natural Gas

[Charlie Passut](#)

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Despite sober assessments on climate change and the prospects for a carbon tax, President Obama on Monday defended natural gas and hydraulic fracturing (fracking) as necessary tools in the transition away from greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

"This is a pretty sympathetic crowd, but some folks will push back on this," Obama told attendees of the first-ever South by South Lawn (SXML) Festival at the White House. "We've significantly reduced the amount of power that we're generating from coal, and it's going to continue to go down...One of the reasons [for that decline] is not because of our regulations -- it's been because natural gas got really cheap as a consequence of fracking.

"There are a lot of environmentalists who absolutely object to fracking because their attitude is sometimes it's done really sloppy and releases methane...leaks into people's water supplies and aquifers, and when done improperly can really harm a lot of people. Their attitude is 'we've got to leave that stuff in the ground if we're going to solve climate change.'

"I get all that. On the other hand, the fact that we're transitioning from coal to natural gas means less GHG...Until we invent the perfect energy source...we've got to live in the real world. I say all that not because I don't recognize the urgency of the problem, [but] because we're going to have to straddle between the world as it is and the world as we want it to be and build that bridge."

Obama made his comments during an SXML panel discussion with actor Leonardo DiCaprio and Katharine Hayhoe, an atmospheric scientist and associate professor of political science at Texas Tech University.

"We must empower leaders who not only believe in climate change, but are willing to do something about it," DiCaprio said in his opening remarks, just before introducing Obama. "The scientific consensus is in, and the

argument is now over. If you do not believe in climate change, you do not believe in facts or in science or empirical truths and therefore, in my humble opinion, should not be allowed to hold public office."

Obama said climate change was happening faster than scientists had predicted five, and even 10, years earlier. At one point he called climate change "perversely designed to be really hard to solve politically."

"What we're seeing [are] changes in climate patterns that are on the more pessimistic end of what was possible," Obama said. "We're really in a race against time. Part of what I'm hoping everybody here comes away [with] is hope that we can actually do something about it, but also a sense of urgency. This is not going to be something that we can just kind of mosey along about and put up with climate denial or obstructionist politics."

DiCaprio railed against "corporate greed from the oil and gas industries," but he conceded that some companies "are starting to realize that addressing the climate change issue can actually spur economic activity." He then asked Obama how the government could encourage more companies to make business decisions that would be beneficial to the environment.

"Companies respond to incentives," the president said. "The question then becomes can we harness the power and the creativity of the marketplace to come up with innovation and solutions?"

"The economics of energy are extremely complicated, but let me just simplify it as much as possible: Dirty fuel is cheap because we've been doing it a long time. We know how to burn coal to produce electricity. We know how to burn oil and we know how to burn gas. And if it weren't for pollution, the natural inclination of everybody would be to say 'let's go with the cheap stuff.' ... If we're going to be able to solve this problem, we're going to have to come up with new sources of energy that are clean and cheap. That's going to involve research [and] investment...it takes time to ramp up these new energy sources, and we're in a battle against time."

Obama then mentioned his Clean Power Plan (CPP), which he called "the centerpiece of our climate change strategy." The plan is currently before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit (see *Daily GPI*, [May 18](#)).

"The best way we can spur that kind of innovation is to either create regulations that say 'figure it out, and if you don't figure it out then you're going to pay a penalty,' or to create something like a carbon tax which gives an economic incentive for businesses to do this," Obama said. "Now, I'll be honest with you -- [with] the current environment in Congress, and certainly internationally, the likelihood of an immediate carbon tax is a ways away."

"[Under the CPP], what we're saying to states is, 'you can figure out the energy mix, but you've got to figure out how to reduce your carbon emissions, and you need to work with your utilities [and] your companies and come up with innovative solutions. We're not going to dictate exactly how you do it, but if you don't start reducing them you're going to have problems and we'll come up with a plan for you.'"