

Acton Board of Selectmen
c/o Acton Town Hall
472 Main Street,
Acton, MA 01720

9 March 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

From our New England town of Acton, Massachusetts, we write to you in the spirit of our forebears, who demonstrated the power of “revolutionary thinking” and engaged, democratic participation in their own governance. We write, with a profound sense of concern and urgency, to request that you do everything in your power to ensure the strongest possible global climate change treaty at the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009. Such a treaty should identify 350 parts per million by volume (ppmv) of atmospheric CO₂ as a necessary — and the only sustainable — goal.

Why are we, as the elected governance body for our town, moved to contact you? The reasons are several, but all turn on our community’s recognition of the enormous importance of the natural world and its functioning systems. We are keenly aware of the impending impacts of global climate change, including the flooding of coastal regions such as the Massachusetts coast and Cape Cod. As in many exurban communities, transportation is a big part of residents’ lives and a real frontier for more environmentally responsible effort, such as more mass transit infrastructure, shaping development “smartly,” and making the town more walkable. Acton is active on all these fronts. We also count Bill McKibben, who has written and spoken so compellingly on the climate crisis, and who hails from nearby Lexington, as a local hero. All told, we are a community deeply concerned about global climate change, and endorse a 350 ppmv ceiling as the centerpiece of international climate agreements.

We recognize that 350 ppmv and all that necessitates is a supremely challenging goal. We understand that most previous plans floated by governmental bodies have been less aggressive, typically targeting final levels at 450 ppmv or more. The latest science, summarized in a paper by NASA climate scientist James Hansen, et al. — “Target Atmospheric CO₂: Where Should Humanity Aim?” — makes clear that these earlier, higher targets account only for the faster-acting positive feedback loops that are causing temperatures to rise in response to increased CO₂ levels. The longer-term geological record shows that slower-acting positive feedback loops, which arise from phenomena such as ice sheet

disintegration, vegetation migration, and greenhouse-gas release from soils, tundra, and ocean sediments, put a safe upper limit on CO₂ levels at 350 ppmv.

Current atmospheric levels are near 387 ppmv, and rising by 2 ppmv each year. Without action to bring our levels back to 350 ppmv in this century, we risk flipping the planetary climate system into the much-warmer, ice-free conditions of the long-ago, prehuman past — conditions with which most of the species alive today have no experience, which would flood much of the coastal land that houses so much of the Earth's population, and which would cause cataclysmic changes in many of the planet's natural systems.

The measures necessary to accomplish this 350 ppmv goal, such as phasing out coal plants in the next two decades and establishing global cap-and-trade systems, are daunting. The U.S. and other developed countries must be willing to move beyond historical understandings, comfort zones, and political strictures to embrace levels of international cooperation, including technology and capital transfer, without precedent in human history. Yet these measures and this cooperation are precisely what we must achieve because they are our best chance for coming generations of children to grow up, look back, and say “thank you” for making hard choices, rather than look back in astonishment and outrage. Indeed, these choices are the ones that will allow coming generations to live in a world relatively like the one we inhabit and love.

In November of 2007, on the release of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report, Rajendra Pachauri, the scientist and economist who chairs the IPCC, spoke these sobering words: “If there's no action before 2012, that's too late What we do in the next two to three years will determine our future. This is the defining moment.” The 2009 Copenhagen conference, and the negotiations leading up to it, may represent the last political window the world has to set our civilization on course for a future in a recognizable world.

During Hillary Clinton's Senate confirmation hearing, our own Senator John Kerry said, “Scientists have now revised the levels of supportable greenhouse gas emissions from 550 parts per million to 450 to now 350. . . . So our challenge is going to be even greater than it was five months ago, Senator, or two months ago. The perception that we can kind of creep at this . . . is foolhardy.”

Scientists have for some time recognized the urgent need for muscular action to arrest climate change. Clearly, much of the American public and many politicians now do, as well. Please understand this growing call as the beginning of what will soon become a groundswell. This year, the most important number for every American and every citizen on Earth is 350. We urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to make that number the linchpin of both domestic policies and of international climate negotiations. Now is *the* time to take bold and groundbreaking steps on climate change — steps that can offer us a decent

future, as James Hansen has said, on “a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted.”

Thank you for your hard work on this issue and your service to all of us.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned Board of Selectmen of Acton, Massachusetts

Lauren Rosenzweig, Chair

Paulina Knibbe, Vice Chair

Andrew Magee, Clerk

Peter Berry

Terra Friedrichs

cc: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton
Todd Stern, Special Envoy for Climate Change
Secretary of Energy Steven Chu

Senator Edward Kennedy
Senator John Kerry
Representative Niki Tsongas