This year, Paris, France will host the 21st Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC): a long, important name, with even more important results. The COP21 will be addressing the increasingly critical issue of climate change, and what exactly we, as a global community, will do about it. Representatives from 195 countries around the world are coming together in an attempt to agree on how to combat climate disruption through objectives, rules, and country contributions.

**UH, WHAT’S THE COP21 AND WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?**

- The COP is the governing body of the annual international climate change conference hosted by the UNFCCC. These climate negotiations first started in Berlin in 1995 and have repeated, on average, once a year.
- This year, the Parties have agreed that they will finalize the post-2020 successor to the Copenhagen Accords and Kyoto Protocol at COP21.
- The Paris Agreement is expected to include three elements:
  - (a) A negotiated text that sets out the overarching objectives of the agreement, and specifies commitments on cross-cutting issues such as reporting requirements and financial support;
  - (b) An annex that compiles the contributions that each country will make to the global effort to reduce emissions through 2025 or 2030 (INDCs); and
  - (c) The Lima to Paris action agenda, which will include actions by non-sovereign actors.
- Each of the UNFCCC’s 195 member countries have agreed to submit an Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) this year, which will outline the actions they will take between 2020 and 2025 or 2030. The actions set out in the annex will be “nationally determined,” meaning that they will not be subject to international negotiation or binding review.
  - Some countries, like the United States, Mexico, and Canada have already submitted their INDCs.
  - The other countries will submit their contributions through the summer and early fall.
- Throughout 2015, there will be four meetings of the parties, called “intersessionals,” that will help to refine the negotiating text.

**SO WHAT THE HECK DOES THAT MEAN?**

- Two things are clear:
  - We can’t solve the problem alone, and the consequences to our economy, quality of life, and national security will be dire if we don’t work with others to reduce climate pollution.
  - A strong deal in Paris will help us ensure that all countries participate and do their fair share.
- The Sierra Club has long been actively engaged in the UNFCCC process. In most years, we have focused our work inside the negotiations to achieve specific policy outcomes and to ensure that the U.S. plays a constructive role. This year, with a headline deal on the agenda, the stakes will be much higher, and international climate issues will gain far more attention than at any time since the Copenhagen meeting in 2009.

**YOU SAID THE U.S. SUBMITTED THEIR “INDC”. WHAT DOES IT SAY?**

- We’ve committed to reducing our carbon emissions by 26-28 percent by 2025, and the Obama administration has multiple proposals and initiatives for to reach this target.
  - Recognizing the strength of opposition in the current Congress, and assuming no future Congressional action, the Obama Administration intends to meet this goal using only its existing regulatory authority.
  - The INDC reflects steps that the Administration has already taken, including improving fuel efficiency for cars and trucks, increasing energy efficiency of appliances, reducing building emissions, and approving the use of alternatives of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs).
It also reflects further actions to:

- Finalize safeguards to cut carbon pollution from new and existing coal-fired power plants and promulgate draft Model Federal Plan by summer 2015 (Clean Power Plan);
- Promulgate post-2018 fuel economy standards for heavy-duty vehicles (expected in June 2015);
- Develop standards to address methane emissions from landfills and the oil and gas sector;
- Reduce the use and emissions of high-global warming potential (GWP) HFCs;
- Further reduce emissions from building and appliances; and
- Further reduce emissions from federal government operations.

**ENGLISH, PLEASE?**

Basically, we’ve submitted our INDC, which means that we’ve made an outright statement that we as a country are going to actively combat the progression of carbon pollution. We care about our future generations and don’t want them to grow up in a world ravaged by climate disruption. Our goals that you read above may seem ambitious, but they’re absolutely and completely doable. Not only would they help America become stronger by cutting pollution and tapping clean energy, but it would put us in control of our energy situation and create clean energy jobs. U.S. action, and similar actions by countries around the world, is a necessary first step toward avoiding the worst effects of catastrophic climate disruption.

- It’s what Americans want. Americans support U.S. leadership in tackling climate change—a recent poll found that 72 percent of Americans support the U.S. signing an international climate agreement.
- The Administration’s commitment is not just popular, it’s doable. The President is making this commitment with the authority that the position has been granted by Congress and the Constitution.
- Other countries are acting with us:
  - In a joint announcement with the United States, China agreed to peak its emissions as soon as possible before 2030 and to generate 20 percent of their electricity from clean energy sources by 2030, the first announcement of its kind from the world’s largest carbon emitter.
  - The UK has committed to ending the use of unabated coal power.
  - Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promised solar power for all by 2019, an initiative that will bring at least one light bulb to every home.
  - In the coming months, we expect additional ambitious commitments to pour in that will further prove the world is ready to act and keep us on the right track to Paris and beyond.

**WHERE DO I FIT IN?**

While Paris will be an important step for meaningful and lasting climate action, people around the world aren’t waiting around for the politicians to act. Citizens and private sector actors are embracing the opportunities that come with climate action—and they will continue to drive progress on cutting carbon emissions and growing the global clean energy economy.

These actions are a critical first step, but don’t underestimate our ability to do more. There will be opportunities to do more in the future, to tap the United States’ full clean energy potential. This includes further coal plant retirement and subsequent clean energy growth and following through on California’s recent commitment to reduce emissions by 40 percent below 1990 levels, just to name a few.

We’re just about the last generation to be able to do anything about climate change. Soon, carbon levels may be too high, the Arctic may have already melted, or the sea levels will have risen too much to turn back the tide. Paris is so monumentally important because not only are we finally making a globalized statement that these things are, indeed, happening, but that it’s even more vital that we stop their progress. Working together, as individuals, communities, countries, and the world as a whole, both in agreements within the COP21 and moving forward, we can, and will slow climate disruption, and save the beautiful, life-giving, amazing planet we call home.

**SO HOW CAN I HELP?**

We know from the People’s Climate March that to change everything, we need everyone. This means you, too. So start speaking out about COP21—talk to your friends, your family, your coworkers, and your neighbors to let them know what’s going on. Visit actinparis.org to learn more, share the Sierra Club’s posts and Tweets, and join our photo campaign to let President Obama know we need a strong commitment in Paris. Paris is a key step forward. We need you to help us get there.