

# Overcoming Inertia on Climate Change

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**Brown's three-year Climate Solutions Initiative seeks to remove barriers that have stalled climate action on local and global levels.**

The raging West Coast wildfires that destroyed lives and forests and made breathing hazardous this fall were not just horrifying. For many observers, the infernos — coupled with the growing intensity of Atlantic and Gulf Coast hurricanes — continue to signal the catastrophic consequences of pervasive inaction on climate change, a defining challenge of the 21st century.



"As a society we are stuck — hoping for the best while knowing our behavior is pushing us toward the worst," says Stephen Porder (left), Brown's assistant provost for sustainability and a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology.

Porder is co-leading a major effort at Brown to overcome the inertia that, he and other researchers assert, has stymied meaningful progress to halt and reverse the effects of climate change for decades, locally and globally. The Climate Solutions Initiative aims to help universities, cities, regions and international governing bodies abandon status quo approaches, identify obstacles to change, and then work to remove those inertial barriers in areas ranging from heating systems to international trade.

Announced this fall, the three-year initiative will harness Brown's leadership in education, scholarship and research-informed infrastructure changes. It is a natural extension of the University's ambitious plans to decarbonize by reducing campus greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2040. The initiative also builds on

Brown's strong community partnerships and reputation for high-impact, collaborative research on environmental problems.

The initiative will create courses and advocacy opportunities for students; convene critical conversations among stakeholders on and off campus; and generate research and policy analyses — including through a new Climate Solutions Lab at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs.

The Office of the Provost, Watson Institute and Institute at Brown for Environment and Society (IBES) will manage the initiative, with faculty direction from Porder; Jeff Colgan, an associate professor of political science at the Watson Institute; J. Timmons Roberts, a professor of environmental studies and sociology; and Dov Sax, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology and interim IBES director. An anonymous donor is providing support, with additional funding from the offices of the president and provost.

## Campus Impact

Brown's Climate Solutions Initiative aims to clear roadblocks across four domains, or scales, that range from local to global: 1) college and university campuses, 2) U.S. cities, 3) New England states, and 4) global trade.

The first scale draws upon lessons from Brown's bold decarbonization program, which involves transitioning to 100% renewably generated electricity (from solar and wind) in the next few years, and eliminating fossil fuel combustion for heating and transportation by 2040 at the latest. Brown has also committed to selling all its financial investments in companies that extract fossil fuels. With hundreds of U.S. campuses aiming

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to become carbon-neutral, Brown plans to share its knowledge through workshops and nurture a larger university movement toward decarbonization.

The initiative will spawn new, widely available courses, including one Porder is developing on the institutional, economic, social and technological pathways to climate solutions. In addition, Brown students will participate through internships, interactions with public officials and independent studies. Says Roberts, "Engaged learning allows students to learn from an urgent issue and make a real difference while they're in school."

## Energy Reforms in Providence

As part of scale two, focused on cities, initiative leaders plan to intensify the University's efforts to help the City of Providence lighten its carbon footprint. Working with city administrators, utilities, developers and clean energy experts, they hope to reduce emissions from such sources as transportation, heating and air conditioning. One idea is to develop a district-wide heating system powered by renewables throughout the city's Jewelry District — an efficient alternative to making energy improvements building by building.

This complements work underway, co-led by Brown, to prepare Providence to withstand rising sea levels and other looming effects of global warming.

## Catalyzing Change in New England

The initiative will, through its third scale, expand the impact of Brown's Climate and Development Lab, a think tank based at IBES where students and faculty have been studying climate-obstruction efforts and organizations for several years. They have exposed, for example, how electric and gas utilities in three New England states defend the status quo through massive lobbying spending, political contributions and meetings with regulators and legislators.

"We've found that good climate legislation isn't enough, nor is a supportive public, if the system has been set up so the levers of power can be easily influenced by special interest groups," says Sax.

With initiative support, lab director Roberts and his team plan to convene workshops with utilities, public officials, citizens and others to tear down inertial barriers to promoting clean energy in New England.

## Global Climate Politics

Driving progress on the fourth scale, global trade, is Brown's new Climate Solutions Lab at the Watson Institute, a hub for high-impact social science scholarship. The lab will engage faculty specializing in energy, trade, finance and other climate-adjacent subjects on questions of international climate politics.

"Our goal is to help Watson ramp up its efforts on climate change and bring the faculty's policy expertise to bear on this important problem," says lab director Colgan.

The Climate Solutions Lab released a report in October outlining 10 recommended actions for the next U.S. president to address climate change. The lab will also support a new sequence of climate courses, including one offered by Colgan this fall on the politics of climate change. Looking ahead, the lab will provide a free syllabus bank for instructors anywhere and support a national research network of junior scholars interested in climate politics. It also aims to produce climate-related policy analyses on global trade policies and U.S.-China relations in a warming world.

Challenging the status quo around climate change won't be easy. But Brown's Climate Solutions Initiative is poised to catalyze the kinds of creative thinking and collaboration needed to turn personal, institutional and societal inertia into action.

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