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A dangerous shift in Obama's 'climate change' rhetoric

By Maxwell T. Boykoff January 27, 2012

What happened to “climate change” and “global warming”?

The Earth is still getting hotter, but those terms have nearly disappeared from political vocabulary. Instead, they have been replaced by less charged and more consumer-friendly expressions for the warming planet.

President Obama's [State of the Union address](#) Tuesday was a prime example of this shift. The president said “climate change” just once — compared with zero mentions in the 2011 address and two in 2010. When he did utter the phrase, it was merely to acknowledge the polarized atmosphere in Washington, saying, “The differences in this chamber may be too deep right now to pass a comprehensive plan to fight climate change.” By contrast, Obama used the terms “energy” and “clean energy” nearly two dozen times.

That tally reflects a broader change in how the president talks about the planet. [A recent Brown University study](#) looked specifically at the Obama administration's language and found that mentions of “climate change” have been replaced by calls for “clean energy” and “energy independence.” Graciela Kincaid, a co-author of the study, wrote: “The phrases ‘climate change’ and ‘global warming’ have become all but taboo on Capitol Hill. These terms are stunningly absent from the political arena.”

In 2009, the Obama administration purposefully began to refer to greenhouse gas emissions as “carbon pollution” and “heat-trapping emissions.” This change is evident in statements from top officials such as White House science adviser John Holdren, Energy Secretary Steven Chu, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration head Jane Lubchenco and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson. Lubchenco [told a reporter](#) that the choice of those terms “is intended to make what's happening more understandable and more accessible to non-technical audiences.”

These choices are also reflected in news coverage around the world. My colleague Maria Mansfield and I [monitor 50 major newspapers](#) in 20 countries, and we documented that explicit mentions of “climate change” and “global warming” dropped by more than a third from 2010 to 2011.

There is power in how language is deployed, and people setting policy agendas know this well. In 2002, Republican political strategist Frank Luntz issued a widely cited memo advising that the Bush administration should shift its rhetoric on the climate. “It’s time for us to start talking about ‘climate change’ instead of global warming. . . . ‘Climate change’ is less frightening than ‘global warming,’ ” the memo said.

Luntz was not alone in wanting to change the terminology. The nonprofit group EcoAmerica issued a report in 2009 arguing that the terms “global warming” and “climate change” both needed rebranding. In their place, the group recommended the phrase “our deteriorating atmosphere.”

But what do we lose when global warming and climate change get repackaged as clean energy? We wind up missing a thorough understanding of the breadth of the problem and the range of possible solutions.

To start, talking only about clean energy omits critical biological and physical factors that contribute to the warming climate. “Clean energy” doesn’t call to mind the ways we use the land and how the environment is changing. Where in the term is the notion of the climate pollution that results from clear-cutting Amazon rain forests? What about methane release in the Arctic, where global warming is exposing new areas of soil in the permafrost?

“Clean energy” also neatly bypasses any idea that we might need to curb our consumption. If the energy is clean, after all, why worry about how much we’re using — or how unequal the access to energy sources might be?

And terms such as “carbon pollution” ignore that climate change isn’t just a carbon issue. Some greenhouse gases, such as nitrous oxide, do not contain carbon, and not all carbon-containing emissions, such as carbon monoxide, trap heat.

When the president moves away from talking about climate change and talks more generally about energy, as he did in the State of the Union, calling for “an all-out, all-of-the-above strategy that develops every available source of American energy,” the impact is more than just political.

Calling climate change by another name creates limits of its own. The way we talk about the problem affects how we deal with it. And though some new wording may deflect political heat, it can’t alter the fact that, “climate change” or not, the climate is changing.

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