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Environment: race against time

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As Earth becomes hotter and public awareness rises, scientists have dismissed "out-of-date" prior predictions for climate change. Though last month's G8 summit of the world's most advanced nations addressed the issue and saw groundbreaking plans made, questions rise as to how long we have left. Former New Yorker writer [Bill McKibben](#) describes the difficulties of mobilising so many countries against a ticking clock

At last month's G8 summit, western leaders including Barack Obama and Gordon Brown pledged to forge a deal that would hold the increase in global temperatures to 2 degrees Celsius and the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide to 450 parts per million.

Two years ago that would have been an unthinkable progressive stance. Then, the American president wanted to do essentially nothing at all about global warming. And because two years ago it seemed like those numbers might be good enough to tackle the problem.

But two years ago, almost to the week, scientists noticed that the Arctic was losing ice at an almost unbelievable pace, outstripping the climate models by decades. Clearly we'd passed a threshold, and global warming had gone from future threat to present crisis. It wasn't just Arctic ice; at about the same time methane levels in the atmosphere began to spike, apparently as a result of thawing permafrost. Surveys of high altitude glaciers showed they were uniformly melting, and much faster than expected. Oceanographers reported – incredulously – that we'd managed to make the oceans 30% more acidic.

Those observations changed everything – and they produced what is almost certainly the most important number in the world. A Nasa team headed by James Hansen reported that the maximum amount of carbon the atmosphere can safely hold is 350ppm, at least if we want a planet "similar to the one on which civilization developed and to which life on earth is adapted." Since we're already at 390ppm, the message was clear: we don't need to buy an insurance policy to reduce the threat of future warming. We need a fire extinguisher, and we need it now.

Scientists have heard that message – in March they gathered by the thousands at an emergency conference to declare that the five-year-old findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change were dangerously out of date.

But politicians haven't caught up. As we head toward the crucial Copenhagen talks slated for December, Obama and the rest of the world's political class are still using the dated science and its now stale conclusions. It's easy to understand why: reaching a deal that would meet even that 2 degree target is incredibly hard, given the recalcitrance of everyone from China's Central Committee to the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. Aiming even higher could undermine the entire process – asked about tougher targets Obama recently said that they risked making "the best the enemy of the good."

That's a smart answer, for almost every other issue on earth. If he can't get national health care through the Congress, then some halfway plan is a good fallback – you can come back in a decade and make it stronger. But global warming is different, the first truly timed test we've ever faced. If we don't address it very dramatically and very soon, then we won't ever fix it – each season that more ice melts and more carbon accumulates increases the chance that we'll never get it under control, because those feedback loops are taking the outcome out of our hands. So far we've raised the temperature less than one degree Celsius, and that's melted the Arctic. You really want to go for two?

It's not fair to make Obama, Brown or any other politician shoulder this burden alone. To meet the scientific challenge would require re-gearing the world's whole economy far faster than any leader currently plans. The only analogy is the mobilisation that won World War II – and right now that's not politically possible. Right now half-measures like the legislation wending its way through the American Congress are the best we can do.

Obama could provide more leadership (I'd send him on a daylong high profile trip from Barrow, Alaska to the US Antarctic base) but if we want to extend the limits of political possibility, we need to build a real movement. That's starting to happen. In September a coalition of environmental and aid groups will stage a campaign they're calling TckTckTck to highlight the urgency of the crisis.

A crew of us at [350.org](#) have been working with youth groups, churches, and others for the

last two years, and our efforts will culminate with a huge day of global action on October 24 with events in most of the world's nations. We're all trying hard to help the scientists reboot this debate, changing the political climate enough so that leaders everywhere will be able to move more boldly.

It's a long shot, but not so long as hoping that we can muddle through. The planet is done negotiating, and we know its bottom line: 350 parts per million. It's hard to get 180 nations to agree on a useful pact. It's hard to get 60 Senators to sign on to a powerful bill. But it's even harder to amend the laws of nature.

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