

1 **Resolution on Climate Change and Energy**

2

3 **Submitted by the Commission on Social Action to the Union for Reform Judaism's**

4 **70th General Assembly**

5

6 Jewish tradition emphasizes that human dominion over nature does not provide a license
7 to abuse the environment; rather we are called to “till and tend” God’s Earth (*Genesis*
8 *2:15*), and reminded in the Midrash that if we fail to do so, there will be nobody after us
9 to repair our damage (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13*). We are also repeatedly commanded to
10 care for the poorest and most vulnerable among us; this means ensuring adequate access
11 to basic resources and a healthy environment for all people, including marginalized
12 communities at home and throughout the world.

13

14 For more than forty years the Reform Movement has advocated in defense of our
15 environment and all those species — from the smallest creatures to humankind itself —
16 that rely on our shared natural habitat and resources for survival. Since our 1965
17 Resolution on Conservation and Development of Natural Resources, we have spoken out
18 for cleaner air, water, and land by decrying toxic waste, fighting pollution, and calling on
19 our synagogues and congregants to make wise use of limited natural resources in our
20 personal and communal lives. Greening Reform Judaism, a new URJ web initiative
21 (www.urj.org/green), provides our congregations and congregants with the resources,
22 including Jewish texts, green building guides, and examples of green synagogue success
23 stories, to effectively lead the way to a more environmentally sustainable Jewish

24 community. The URJ is also central to the advocacy and programmatic work of the
25 Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), the umbrella group representing
26 scores of national and regional Jewish organizations committed to environmental
27 protection and energy conservation, including its new Jewish Energy Covenant
28 Campaign to transform the way the Jewish community views energy and environmental
29 issues and make a meaningful and unique contribution to the global effort to confront
30 climate change.

31

32 We have long understood the need for comprehensive and progressive energy policies
33 that protect all people and increase our national security and that of our allies. In 1978,
34 the URJ Board of Trustees declared that, “the priorities of a national energy policy should
35 be the conservation and development of renewable alternative resources” and that “a
36 comprehensive national energy program must be spearheaded by appropriate and
37 responsible government policy.” At the same time, we have repeatedly expressed caution
38 about the expansion of nuclear power, as in our 1991 Resolution on a New North
39 American Energy Strategy which, “reaffirm[s] our opposition to the further expansion of
40 nuclear energy until the unanswered questions regarding safety and disposal of nuclear
41 wastes are satisfactorily resolved.”

42

43 We now face the unprecedented challenge of climate change due to greenhouse gas
44 emissions, and the need for serious and urgent action on this issue has never been clearer.
45 This growing threat, along with our rapidly decreasing supply of fossil fuels, further
46 illustrates the need for strong energy and environmental policies at every level.

47

48 The greenhouse gas emissions that cause global climate change have real costs for our
49 health and our environment, and should be priced and limited accordingly. When we
50 recognize this fact, we can take steps that both protect our planet and ensure increased
51 access to affordable, reliable, and clean energy. While there are many potential ways to
52 achieve these goals, the two most prominent policy options under consideration today are
53 a cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gas emissions and a direct tax on high-carbon
54 energy sources.

55

56 A cap-and-trade system sets a limit on national greenhouse gas emissions and brings
57 emissions levels down over time by requiring power plants and other larger polluters to
58 obtain permits for their emissions. The sale and trade of permits on a ‘carbon market’
59 provides a financial incentive to reduce emissions and generates revenue for developing
60 clean energy, helping consumers adjust to short-term changes in energy costs, adapting to
61 climate change effects, and other needs. A cap-and-trade system fixes the national level
62 of permissible carbon emissions and lets the actors on the carbon market decide the value
63 of these emissions. A key question is whether the government, as overseer of the carbon
64 market, should sell permits to emitters or distribute them for free; this is the “auction vs.
65 allocation” debate. Those who advocate for the sale of permits hold that this process is
66 necessary to generate revenue to support the initiatives noted above and that the free
67 allocation of emissions permits will result in windfall profits to utility companies. Others
68 contend that freely providing permits to fossil-fuel intensive industries and electric
69 companies, at least in the early years of a cap and trade program, is necessary to avoid a

70 spike in energy prices among electric companies that could potentially be passed along to
71 consumers.

72

73 In contrast to a cap and trade system, a carbon tax fixes the cost of emissions by adding a
74 pre-determined tax to each unit of high-carbon energy produced, to compensate for the
75 environmental and health costs of greenhouse gas emissions. Under a carbon tax system
76 the price of emissions is fixed and energy producers and consumers decide how much
77 carbon they are willing to pay to emit.

78

79 Our community need not choose between these options; rather, our priority must be to
80 support well-constructed policies designed to reduce emissions as quickly as possible,
81 speed the transition to clean energy sources, and protect vulnerable populations during
82 this transition.

83

84 Climate change is fundamentally a social justice issue that marries our mandate to be
85 good stewards of the earth with our call to care for the least among us. The vulnerable
86 developing nations that contribute the least to climate change will be among the first to
87 feel its effects, and many Pacific Island and African nations are already experiencing
88 impacts in the form of droughts, natural disasters, and changing agricultural patterns. As
89 the largest historical producer of greenhouse gas emissions, the United States is
90 responsible for leading the way to global solutions.

91

92 We must also ensure that low- and moderate-income individuals and families, minority
93 communities, and other populations particularly vulnerable to both environmental
94 degradation and volatile energy prices and economic transitions, do not bear a
95 disproportionate burden from either the effects of climate change or the effects of policies
96 designed to shape energy choices. Well-crafted climate and energy policies can protect
97 these communities and create opportunities for those in need by creating good-paying
98 “green” jobs in innovative industries including the manufacture and distribution of
99 energy from clean, renewable sources, weatherization of homes, businesses, and
100 government buildings, and environmental health and education.

101

102 We must put our world on the path to a sustainable future built on clean energy. The
103 current political climate makes the prospect for progress more tangible than ever before,
104 and it has never been more critical to make our voices heard.

105

106 **THEREFORE**, the Union for Reform Judaism resolves to:

107

108 1. Support U.S. and Canadian domestic climate and energy policies that:

109

110 (a) Reduce greenhouse gas emissions through properly constructed governmental
111 policies — such as cap-and-trade, a carbon tax or other methods to achieve these
112 ends — that ensure that the price of energy reflects its *true* costs, including costs
113 to our environment;

114 (b) Encourage the sale of carbon permits, rather than their free allocation (if a
115 cap-and-trade system is adopted), to ensure that polluters pay for their emissions
116 and that there is a funding source for investment in renewable energy
117 development, green jobs training programs, and protection of the vulnerable at
118 home and abroad from climate change effects;

119 (c) Increase energy independence through long-term development of clean, safe
120 renewable sources of energy such as wind and solar power through appropriate
121 incentives and new regulatory policies;

122 (d) Include programs to help those whose short-term economic security may be
123 affected by climate and energy policies that speed the transition from fossil fuels
124 to renewable sources of energy, including assistance to low- and moderate-
125 income people to compensate for proportionately larger expenses for electricity,
126 fuel, and transportation; training and retraining programs to prepare current
127 employees in fossil-fuel-dependent industries and the future workforce for green
128 jobs in the renewable energy and energy efficiency sectors; and economic
129 transition assistance for coal miners and other affected workers;

130 (e) Provide sufficient funding – in addition to existing international aid and
131 development programs – for international adaptation programs to assist the most
132 vulnerable developing nations as they confront the inevitable impacts of climate
133 change; and

134 (f) Explore additional sources of energy, including the benefits, safety and
135 security concerns of nuclear power.

136

137 2. Urge the U.S. and Canadian governments to work cooperatively with other
138 nations to address climate change by participating and playing a leading role in
139 international bodies, treaties, protocols, and conferences (especially the December
140 2009 Copenhagen conference) that promote sustainable responses to climate
141 change, including:

142 (a) Protecting tropical forests and other carbon-absorbing ecosystems around the
143 world through sustainable development of forests and other natural resources;

144 (b) Investing in global development and dissemination of clean energy
145 technologies; and

146 (c) Responding to climate change impacts throughout the world with a focus on
147 adaptation efforts in the most vulnerable nations and communities.

148

149 3. Urge our Movement and its members to act in ways that reflect our belief in the need
150 for immediate action on this issue by:

151 (a) Encouraging congregations, URJ camps, and other arms of the Reform
152 Movement to engage in concerted conservation efforts, as outlined in the URJ's
153 Greening Reform Judaism Initiative (www.urj.org/green), to reduce energy and
154 other resource consumption and use renewable energy in their facilities,
155 programs, and practices including plans for future construction, expansion, and
156 remodeling;

157 (b) Encouraging congregants to raise awareness of climate change and energy
158 issues within the Jewish community, and take action toward integrating an ethic
159 of environmental stewardship into every aspect of Jewish life;

160 (c) Encouraging all individuals to engage with their local communities in
161 promoting stewardship through sustainable practices and policies; and
162 (d) Encouraging the URJ and its partner institutions to support these efforts by
163 providing educational resources and facilitating the creation of networks of
164 individuals and communities dedicated to advancing climate and energy solutions,
165 including using the resources and supporting the programmatic work of the
166 Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life and its new Jewish Energy
167 Covenant Campaign.

168