

Climate note #3: “How soon until zero?”

Thomas Lord *February 6, 2019, Berkeley, CA*

Wrapping one’s head around the urgency of climate change action, and the magnitude of that action, is very hard. What are we really talking about, concretely?

For a long time, we’ve all been told the problem will be solved incrementally through various technical innovations and minor changes to law and daily life. Some have even told us, again and again, that “going green” will be a wellspring of economic growth and economic prosperity. We can eat a little less meat or something. California’s even got a Climate Plan™.

Yet the 2018 report from the IPCC¹ reveals a stark reality: Not only must net carbon emissions drop to zero in less than a lifetime² - additionally, a very optimistic estimate is that emissions must fall “only 6% per year”, beginning this year.³ (That might give us a 50/50 chance.)

What does it take to cut emissions 6% in 2019, again in 2020, again in 2021?

How will car commutes be reduced by 6% each year? Can we build new transit systems that fast? Cutting the work-week at major employers, by one day a week, might do it – but that will take the will of the employers, or the legislatures, or the employees, or the direct action activists, or some combination of these.

How will people in Chicago apartments keep from freezing to death in the winter while still emissions fall by 6%? Is there time to electrify all those buildings? Is there time to “green” the generation of that electricity? Of course not. Whatever is the long run, in the short run ad hoc, cheap, fast, temporary solutions are needed. Maybe the DSA can help deploy emergency tools and create warm places of refuge.

The speed of change needed this year and every year for the foreseeable future surpasses all experience. It surpasses the ready capacity of government and every known institution. And it’s a matter of life and death.

About this series

This is the first in a series of very short discussions of climate change, meant to be easily understood by a wide audience.

Please let me know if you spot errors, or have suggestions or questions. I will do my best to improve the notes and to issue corrections as necessary. I can be

¹The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report 15 (“Climate Change of 1.5°C”).

²See *Climate note #1: “The push for zero”* in this series.

³See *Climate note #2: “The carbon budget”* in this series.

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Planned topics

- **Climate note #1: “The push for zero”**
The *gravity* of the situation.
- **Climate note #2: “The carbon budget”**
The *scarcity* of resources to solve the problem.
- **Climate note #3: “How soon until zero?”**
The *urgency* of successful action.
- **Climate note #4: “Mass die-offs? Extinction? Really?!?”**
The *importance* of acting.
- **Climate note #5: “Your lifestyle or your life - physical and economic limits”**
The *sacrifice* required (no sugar-coating).
- **Climate note #6: “Can’t we just make our infrastructure green?”**
The *denialism* popularized by progressive politics.
- **Climate note #7: “What is to be done?”**
How to act wisely, together, in *solidarity*.
- **Climate note #8: “The genocide problem.”**
Are we *monsters*?
- **Climate note #9: “Simple plans of action.”**
A little *courage* is all we need to act.
- **Climate note #10: “Rejoice.”**
A personal reflection.