



A Letter from Alphonse Galdes, Ph.D., Head of Pharmaceutical Operations and Technology at Biogen: It's Time for Companies to Act Like the Climate Crisis is a Health Crisis

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Right now, delegations are descending upon Glasgow for the 26th annual United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) – with more than 100 world leaders gathering to accelerate climate action to meet goals set by the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

When COP21 was convened in Paris back in 2015, conference participants agreed to a set of bold commitments in the pursuit of a healthier, more sustainable tomorrow, including pursuing efforts to limit global temperature increases due to greenhouse gas emissions to no more than 1.5C. Sadly, these efforts are currently [not on track](#). And, as WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus recently observed, “the same unsustainable choices that are killing our planet are killing people.”¹

Take the impact of fossil fuels on public health as one example. A 2021 report by *Environmental Research* found that air pollution may cause as many as [one in five](#) deaths globally. This is a staggering statistic, underscoring the importance of urgent and deliberate climate action.

Of course, if we hope to make significant, lasting progress against climate change, we as a society must all work together. Here are three key priorities that, if embraced, could galvanize action and encourage us all to re-examine the way we work, the way we live and the way we consume energy.

We must accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels

Climate action is essential for human and planetary wellbeing, yet not all pathways to 1.5C will deliver equal health benefits. As organizations implement bold climate commitments, we must prioritize actions that will protect human health and allow people to thrive, since health is everybody's business. This starts by eliminating our reliance on fossil fuels.

Consider the following hypothetical: if the world completely eliminated fossil fuels, it's estimated that global average life expectancy would increase by more than one full year. Let that sink in. In order to help address this challenge, last year Biogen announced Healthy Climate, Healthy Lives, a 20-year, \$250 million climate commitment to address the interrelated challenges of climate, health and equity and eliminate fossil fuels – beginning with zero emissions across our operations by 2040. As part of this effort, we're already using 100% renewable electricity, working to shift our global car fleet to electric and engaging our employees and suppliers around shared climate goals.

This certainly is a step in the right direction, but if we hope to make a substantive impact, all companies in all sectors should embrace becoming fossil fuel free. All the research and advocacy in the world won't matter enough if we don't accelerate the movement away from fossil fuels toward renewables like solar, wind and geothermal power. Our collective goal should be to drive climate actions that will yield co-benefits in health and progress toward a net zero future that is truly healthy, equitable and sustainable for all.

We must advance the science surrounding the health impacts of climate change

Evidence increasingly [shows](#) that fossil fuel emissions can play a direct role in the worsening of various health conditions. As pharma leaders, the great paradox of our industry is that we can't lead in human health without also considering how our operations contribute to these effects. As our industry considers its path forward in recovering from the pandemic, I believe we must play an active role in creating an integrated roadmap for climate and human health.

It's a sentiment shared by Dr. Aaron Bernstein of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, with which Biogen is collaborating to understand better the relationships between climate and health. Dr. Bernstein emphasizes that our health at age 60 is overwhelmingly determined by our health in the first three years of our life. Yet, compared to their grandparents' experiences, children born today will live through [seven times](#) as many heat waves, twice as many wildfires, and nearly three times as many droughts, crop failures and floods. By implementing health systems today with sustainability in mind, we as a society can more effectively and more efficiently improve health outcomes for generations to come.

To gain a better understanding of how to plan for accelerated climate action with health at the forefront, Biogen is collaborating with the [MIT Joint Program](#) on the Science and Policy of Global Change and the MIT Technology and Policy Program to establish an integrated model of climate and health aimed at identifying targets that will lead to climate and health co-benefits. At the same time, we are also collaborating with the Harvard Chan-NIEHS Center for Environmental Health on the most comprehensive meta-analysis to date of the growing body of research that links air pollution to dementia.

We must encourage cross-sector partnerships

In the pursuit of substantive climate-related interventions, working across sectors will be critical. These collaborations combine the scale and reach of the government, the inventiveness of the private sector and the grassroots reach of civil society. One cannot expect policy leaders to solve this issue alone – the private sector absolutely has a role to play. Just consider that [Amazon's](#) climate commitment is equivalent to that of a small country, since the company generates 85% of the emissions of Switzerland or Denmark.

If we truly hope to enact meaningful change, the burden of proof can't just fall on one country, one company or one person – it's a shared responsibility that must be embraced collectively. With this ethos in mind, I look forward to sharing additional details about our continued climate efforts at COP26. We're working to advance a shared vision for a more inclusive and sustainable future and are calling on leaders across sectors and across continents to join us on this journey.

Like all of life's great challenges, deep-rooted systemic change requires a collective and enduring effort. It requires all of us to come together, as citizens of the world, to chart a path forward. The public is depending on us to act. As leaders, we must be willing to answer their call.

¹The WHO's COP26 report, *The Health Argument for Climate Action*, goes on to state that “climate change is the single biggest health threat facing humanity.”