
SHIFTING OUR FOCUS FROM THE ‘LEVEL OF EMISSIONS’ TO THE ‘RATE OF WARMING’.

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Much of the climate debate and its central arguments were formed in the 1990s when we perceived we had decades to get things under control. The context has now dramatically changed. The 2020s already see unprecedented heatwaves, wildfires, floods, emerging food crises and related geopolitical conflict – and yet this process has just begun. Every fraction of a degree of warming now brings us closer to [climate tipping points](#) that if breached, could lead to a runaway process we cannot control. We are teetering on that edge.

Therefore, we need to reset the debate to have a laser focus on the immediate rate of warming and everything that influences it.

This will not be easy. History shows that most large-scale global change happens with many distributed actions. Rather than ‘death by a thousand cuts’, it’s more like ‘life by a thousand little victories.’ Thus, most arguments about the merits of different possible actions on climate change, end up with the same conclusion – we need an ‘all of the above’ strategy. We see no silver bullets or amazing heroes, just all of us, and all that we do.

Sometimes, though very rarely, an idea comes along which is not like that. A single action that could literally change the course of history.

I believe slashing methane emissions urgently, with large reductions this decade, is such an action. Methane is a climate weapon of mass destruction if we don’t act, but a silver bullet if we do. It will not stop climate change - not even close - but it might buy us the time to do so. Success in rapid methane reduction could be the singular difference between achieving some level of messy but manageable global change vs the descent into chaos and economic collapse.

However, we will only take this action if we shift our mindset and focus from the ‘level of emissions’ to the ‘rate of warming’.

It’s a hard argument to make because of the deeply entrenched focus and momentum on emissions reduction – towards which all progress is then seen as additive. As a result, everyone agrees methane is important, but its singular power to change the path we are on is not yet recognised.

Let me be very clear - my key argument is not ‘methane vs CO2’, it is ‘warming vs emissions.’ They’re connected, but very different. And it’s the difference that defines the importance.

If we are to reduce the existential risk of runaway climate change, we must slow the 'rate of warming' in less than 10 years. Even drastic reductions in CO₂ emissions - while essential and urgent for different reasons - will simply [not get us there](#). Firstly, because CO₂ warms the climate slowly (and thus cutting it reduces the rate of warming slowly) and secondly because cutting fossil fuel use also reduces the aerosol pollution which currently has a temporary 'cooling' effect.

Given all the above, we can see that slowing the 'rate of warming' is our single most critical task and urgent methane reduction is the most viable way to achieve it.

We must therefore throw everything at this task – including faster elimination of fossil fuels, especially gas, and a dramatic focus on food and agriculture, particularly livestock. And we must deliver this change in less than 10 years.

It's a tall order. The good news is that, while not easy, it's completely doable. Everything we require is available - we just need to decide. As with fossil fuels, the incumbent players will argue it's complicated and difficult, bad for jobs and the economy, that 'sure we need to change, just not so fast!'

They are completely wrong. The science is clear that [the path we are on](#) – unprecedented climate events, geopolitical chaos, food crises and the risk of runaway warming - is immeasurably and incomparably worse than anything we can do to slow it down.

If you want to understand the detail behind this argument, I explored it all in a [recent paper](#) at the University of Cambridge. It covers the emergency nature of the task, the actions available and the economic opportunities that result. In particular, I explain why a focus on food and agriculture – particularly livestock – should now be our priority task.

This detail matters, but don't let it distract you from the simplicity of the idea. The path we are on today is accelerating climate change with the risk of runaway warming and global economic chaos. We can choose a different path, but only if we slash methane emissions to slow the rate of warming. The future may well be determined by our decision.