

Climate crisis

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‘No more time to waste,’ chair of House climate panel warns ahead of Cop26

Democrat Kathy Castor warns that even Biden’s ambitious Build Back Better bill ‘doesn’t really get us to net zero by 2050’

The alarm bells are ringing. A code red has been declared. With no less than the future of the planet at stake, Kathy Castor, chair of the select committee on the climate crisis, has warned Democrats that there is precious little time left to enact the US president’s aggressive climate agenda and avert the most catastrophic impacts of global warming.

“We just don’t have any more time to waste,” the Florida congresswoman said in an interview with the Guardian ahead of crucial UN climate talks in Scotland. “We have got to act now or else we’re condemning our children and future generations to a really horrendous time.”

Climate scientists say the world must keep the average global temperature from rising more than 1.5C (2.7F) compared with the pre-industrial era, or risk catastrophically more dangerous effects of climate change. Upon rejoining the global effort to confront the climate crisis, Joe Biden vowed that the US would cut emissions by 50% to 52% below 2005 levels by the end of the decade.

Perhaps the best hope of achieving that goal is embedded in legislation pending before Congress that must overcome the objections of a coal-state senator and razor-thin Democratic majorities. If enacted, Castor said the plan to slash planet-heating emissions by accelerating America’s transition away from fossil fuels would be “the most important and far-reaching clean energy and climate bill ever passed by the US Congress”.

But with days left before Biden is expected to depart for the summit, significant obstacles remain.

Senator Joe Manchin, one of the party’s last remaining holdouts, made clear that he would not support a proposed clean electricity program, effectively gutting the most powerful piece of Democrats’ climate plan. The \$150bn proposal, known as the Clean Electricity Performance Program, used a carrot-and-stick approach to reward energy utilities that transitioned from coal and natural gas toward clean power sources like wind, solar and nuclear energy, and penalizing those that do not.

Now White House officials and congressional negotiators are scrambling to salvage pieces of the plan while finding alternative policies that will keep the US on track to meet the president’s emissions targets, including, potentially, a tax on carbon dioxide pollution.

I think now people are really looking at policymakers and asking, ‘What are you going to do about it?’

“It’s clear that investing in clean electricity is one of the most effective ways to unlock emission reductions and create good-paying jobs across our economy, which is why we’ve fought to include a robust Clean Electricity Performance Program in the Build Back Better Act,” Castor said in a statement following news of Manchin’s objection to the program.