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# Climate Scientist James Hansen Warns World is on Wrong Track to Prevent Runaway Global Warming

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JAMES HANSEN former NASA scientist and the director of climate science at Columbia University's Earth Institute.

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In 1988, James Hansen first warned about the dangers of climate change when he testified before Congress. At the time, he was NASA's top climate scientist. He would go on to become the nation's most influential climate scientist. This year he is making his first appearance at a U.N. climate change summit. He has come to Paris to warn world leaders that they are on the wrong track to prevent dangerous global warming.

## TRANSCRIPT

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AMY GOODMAN: We're broadcasting from COP21, from the 21st conference of parties, that is the U.N. climate summit here in Paris, France, that's supposed to lead to the Paris Accord. I'm Amy Goodman, as we turn now to NASA's former top climate scientist, James Hansen. In 1988, Dr. Hansen first warned about the dangers of climate change when he testified before Congress. He would go on to become the nation's most influential climate scientist. This year, he's making his first appearance at a U.N. climate summit. He's come to Paris to warn world leaders that they're on the wrong track to prevent dangerous global warming. James Hansen joins us now, the director of climate science at Columbia University's Earth Institute.

Welcome back to Democracy Now! It's great to have you with us.

JAMES HANSEN: Thanks for having me.

AMY GOODMAN: So, you wrote a piece in The Guardian saying we're at the point now where temperatures are hitting the 1 centigrade mark. You said the U.N. is on the wrong track with plans to limit global warming to 2 degrees Celsius.

JAMES HANSEN: Yeah, absolutely. This is really a total fraud. You know, there's no—we're not going to reduce emissions as long as we let fossil fuels be the cheapest form of energy. There are lots of countries that want to lift their people out of poverty. And, of course, they should do that. But everybody would be better off if the price of fossil fuels was honest. It should include its cost to society.

AMY GOODMAN: So, what is the plan here?

JAMES HANSEN: Well, they—

AMY GOODMAN: And you're coming in, interestingly—

JAMES HANSEN: Yeah.

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**AMY GOODMAN:** —as an outsider. You've never been here before.

**JAMES HANSEN:** Yeah. And—

**AMY GOODMAN:** Which gives you an interesting perspective.

**JAMES HANSEN:** Remarkably, it's not much different than Kyoto, except that here they're not even requiring any connection among the different countries. They're just saying, "Well, each country tell us what you're going to do to reduce your emissions." And at the same time, they allow fossil fuels to be the cheapest energy, and appear to be the cheapest energy. Of course, they're not, really, if you include their cost to society. And that's what we should do. We should add a rising fee to the carbon—the fossil fuel price. It would be very easy to do at the domestic mine or port of entry, a very small number of places. But we're—instead, we're just saying, "Well, let's try harder. We'll—you know, we'll give you a plan. We're going to reduce our emissions," although some countries are not—don't even saying that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What did you make of President Obama's speech on Monday here at the U.N. climate summit?

**JAMES HANSEN:** Well, we have to decide: Are these people stupid, or are they just uninformed? Are they badly advised? I think that he really believes he's doing something. You know, he wants to have a legacy, a legacy having done something in the climate problem. But what he's proposing is totally ineffectual. I mean, there are some small things that are talked about here, you know, the fact that they may have a fund for investment, invest more in clean energies, but these are minor things. As long as fossil fuels are dirt cheap, people will keep burning them.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, why don't you talk, Dr. James Hansen, about what you're endorsing—a carbon tax?

**JAMES HANSEN:** Yeah.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What does it mean? What does it look like?

**JAMES HANSEN:** Yeah. It should be an across-the-board carbon fee. And in a democracy, it's going to—it should—the money should be given to the public. Just give an equal amount to every—you collect the money from the fossil fuel companies. The rate would go up over time, but the money should be distributed 100 percent to the public, an equal amount to every legal resident.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Is Alaska an example of this?

**JAMES HANSEN:** Well, Alaska is giving fossil fuel money to the public, and of course they like that. So it's sort of—it shows how much the public does like getting a monthly check. But what this would do, those people who do better than average in limiting their fossil fuel use would make money. Wealthy people, people who fly around the world a lot and have big houses, they would pay more in increased prices than they would get in their monthly dividend.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Explain what you mean.

**JAMES HANSEN:** Well, because—we're giving all of the money. You collect money from fossil fuel companies, and you distribute it equally to all residents. So the one who does better than average in limiting his fossil fuel use will get more in the dividend than he pays in increased prices.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And how do you know what their fossil fuel use is?

**JAMES HANSEN:** Well, they don't have to—nobody has to think about this. They know. They will just look at prices. Of course, the price at the pump is obvious, and the electricity bill will be obvious. This will move industry and businesses to develop no-carbon and low-carbon energies and products that use little fossil fuels. In fact, the economic study shows that United States, after 10 years, emissions would be reduced 30 percent, because you've got the economy forcing you in the right direction. But as long as you just leave fossil fuels cheap, you're not going to fundamentally change things.

**AMY GOODMAN:** It's not only that fossil fuels are kept cheap, the—not only U.S. government, governments around the world subsidize—



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**JAMES HANSEN:** Yeah.

**AMY GOODMAN:**—the fossil fuel industry—

**JAMES HANSEN:** Yeah.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —far more than any kind of renewables.

**JAMES HANSEN:** Yeah, yeah. Well, that's right, on a total basis. Per unit energy, they're subsidizing renewables more. But that's OK. We shouldn't be subsidizing any of them. Let this carbon price rise. That will favor renewables. It will favor energy efficiency. It will favor nuclear power. It will favor anything that is carbon-free. That's the way we should do it. And that's the way conservatives would accept it. This is a revenue-neutral approach which does not make the government bigger. And I've talked to some leading conservatives and—who understand that this is not a hoax, that climate change is not a hoax, and they are willing to accept this concept of a revenue-neutral carbon fee.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Dr. James Hansen, would you like to weigh in on the presidential election in the United States on the issue of climate change? I believe Donald Trump said he wouldn't even see the pope because of his views on climate change. But it's not only Donald Trump, the Republicans in Congress, and then go to the Democrats.

**JAMES HANSEN:** Yeah, well, there are some nutcases who claim that it's all a hoax, and that's absurd. And I think most of the public recognizes that. You may get a fraction of one party that is—that likes that point of view, but the majority of the public realizes that's nonsense. But I haven't seen any candidate, liberal or conservative, who is proposing what is actually needed. And that's making the price of fossil fuels honest, but not taking the money to make the government bigger, instead give it to the public.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What about the Democrats?

**JAMES HANSEN:** I was saying I haven't seen any politician, Democrat or Republican, who has proposed a revenue-neutral carbon fee. There's an organization, Citizens' Climate Lobby, which has been doubling in size each year the last several years, which is beginning to be heard. In fact, Democrats, Bernie Sanders and Barbara Boxer, proposed a bill that was basically a fee and dividend, except the government was going to take 40 percent of the money. And that makes it—it's not going to work. I mean, first of all, conservatives are never going to accept that. That makes it a tax. And a tax depresses the economy. A carbon fee and dividend actually spurs the economy, because there is some income redistribution. The low-income people will tend to have a better chance to come out ahead in this case, and they tend to spend the money when they get their dividend.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Dr. James Hansen, you talked about the potential collapse of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet. What would that mean?

**JAMES HANSEN:** Well, that would mean several meters of sea level rise. That's the biggest threat that climate change has in store for us, because it would mean that all coastal cities would become dysfunctional. And the economic consequences of that are incalculable. And the number of refugees that you would have—hundred million people in Bangladesh, which most of them would be—have to find some place to go. So, it's something—it's hard to imagine how we can have a governable world if we let the Antarctic ice sheet collapse.

**AMY GOODMAN:** The coastal cities, for example, in the United States, if climate change isn't curbed, what would happen?

**JAMES HANSEN:** Well, just look at New York City, for example. If you had a sea level rise of several meters, you cannot protect these cities. It's not—it's simply not practical if it goes to several meters.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What about building high seawalls?

**JAMES HANSEN:** Well, for a very small area, you may be able to do that, but then, still, when you get storms, you'll get water overthrown over the seawall. It's just not practical. We need to keep a sea level relatively stable, or we have economic consequences that are enormous.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And how do you do that?

**JAMES HANSEN:** You do that by phasing down emissions rapidly, at least a few percent per

**JAMES HANSEN:** You do that by phasing down emissions rapidly, at least a few percent per year. And the only way that will happen is if we have a carbon fee, because otherwise, you know, somebody is going to keep burning it. These countries are saying, "OK, we're going to reduce our emissions 30 percent." But what does that do when the price remains cheap? Somebody else will burn it. That just makes the price even cheaper, if it's less dear. So you have to make the fossil fuel price honest.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, you've been preaching about climate change, speaking about climate change, getting arrested around climate change now for decades. Talk about the science back, what, in 1988 and where it is today. And that brings me to all the exposés that both the *Los Angeles Times* and InsideClimate News have done around Exxon doing brilliant research decades ago and then covering it up. You're at the Earth Institute at Columbia, ExxonMobil threatening Columbia University, saying that the research that is done around this—wrote a letter to Lee Bollinger, the president of Columbia—is misleading, is wrong, and threatening the money they've given to Columbia.

**JAMES HANSEN:** Yeah, worse than that. I remember writing letters complaining about the fact that ExxonMobil was funding changes to textbooks in grade school and junior high school to make it sound like we didn't understand climate change, and we didn't—there was no evidence that humans were causing climate change. So, yeah, that sounds like criminal activity to me. But now, most of the captains of industry actually say they would like to be part of the solution. They have children and grandchildren, too. So, if our government would give them the incentives to do that, by putting a rising fee on carbon, they would love to be part of the solution. I think that's true for most captains of industry, as I call them. But our governments are not doing that. So I really blame it on our governments. They pretend that they're doing something, like what they're doing here. This is a fraud. They're not—they should be smart enough to understand that the policies that they are proposing here are not going to make a significant reduction in global emissions.

**AMY GOODMAN:** In our final 30 seconds—you got arrested over the Keystone XL pipeline. Ultimately, it was torpedoed by President Obama. What do you think needs to happen now? That was grassroots action that was sustained over a period of years.

**JAMES HANSEN:** Yeah, yeah. So—and that's useful, but only if we get a price on carbon, because that's—the only way we'll keep that in the ground is with a rising fee on carbon, so that we get other energies to replace the fossil fuels. So people should really—we need grassroots support, and now people have to actually understand what's needed, because the leaders—you know, you would think you just tell them, "We want to solve the problem." That's not enough. You've actually got to tell them what to do.

**AMY GOODMAN:** I want to thank you for being with us, Dr. James Hansen, director of climate science at Columbia University's Earth Institute. This is *Democracy Now!* We'll be back in a minute.

**NEXT:** African Women, Hit Hardest by Climate Change, Forge New Solutions Across the Continent

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