

Congressional-Executive Commission on China

Hearing  
on  
China's Environmental Challenges and U.S. Responses

Tuesday, September 21, 2021 – 10:00am  
Virtual via Cisco Webex

Statement of Senator Jeff Merkley  
Chair  
Congressional-Executive Commission on China

- Good morning. Today's hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China on "China's Environmental Challenges and U.S. Responses" has come to order.
- The United States and China face many challenges related to the environment, from protecting air and water at home to global action to address climate change. This hearing will expand the Commission's understanding of these issues at a critical time. We are less than six weeks before the world meets in Glasgow for COP26, the pivotal United Nations Climate Conference.
- Events of this summer demonstrate the ravages of climate chaos, from the deadly flooding in Zhengzhou in central China to raging wildfires and heat waves in the American West. As the world heads into COP26, we face a stark choice: we can take urgent, bold, transformative action to transition to clean and renewable energy, or we can resign ourselves to ever-worsening impacts to our lives, livelihoods, and economies. Each of us has to do our part. Governments, especially China and the United States, must come to Glasgow ready to do their fair share.
- This hearing will shed light on the status of China's climate commitments and compliance, as well as other pressing environmental issues such as: the fight for clear air and clean water; the actions of nongovernmental organizations to push for local accountability; the effects of climate change, grassland management, forced ecological migration, and mining on Tibetans; and the downstream effects on other countries of Chinese hydro-dam projects.
- This Commission is dedicated to faithfully and accurately reporting on all the issues we cover, including the environment and climate change. This hearing will provide perspectives on areas of successful environmental governance as well as violations of human rights and the rule of law.
- China is helping spearhead a shift toward dramatically greater production of renewable energy sources at the same time as it leads the world in building out coal infrastructure,

both at home and through the export of coal-fired power plants through the Belt and Road Initiative.

- The Chinese government now prioritizes environmental protection and gives space for some elements of civil society to operate at the same time that it continues to harass and detain rights advocates like those documented in the Commission’s Political Prisoner Database.
- Even where China takes positive steps to protect the environment, the government’s repressive and authoritarian nature can produce tragic human consequences. In this hearing we will hear from a leading supply chain expert whose research uncovered evidence that the modern slavery Uyghurs are subjected to in Xinjiang and through the government’s labor transfer programs extends to China’s massive solar industry.
- The global economy must transition as quickly as possible to renewable energy sources like solar. But we cannot do so on the backs of slave labor. We need to help the solar industry transition to sustainable supply chains that respect human rights. That means diversifying supply chains away from reliance on those that use forced labor. It means building up the domestic manufacturing base here in the United States and in other countries abroad. And, most urgently, it means that the House of Representatives must pass and the President must sign into law the *Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act* that Senator Rubio and I led in the Senate and that my cochair leads in the House.
- I look forward to all of our witnesses’ testimony. I hope this hearing will demonstrate that the United States can – and must – prioritize both climate action and the steadfast defense of human rights. We need to do both. We cannot trade away human rights for cooperation in other areas of the relationship with China. Fortunately, China has its own domestic incentives to take climate change and environmental protection seriously. I hope this hearing will deepen our understanding of how China can respond to those incentives and take urgent action, just as the United States must do here at home.