2019 was the year of ‘climate emergency’ declarations



A rapidly changing climate drove hundreds of governments around the world to declare states of emergency in 2019. While the declarations are largely symbolic gestures, they have in some cases become jumping-off points for real action. It’s the culmination of coordinated efforts by activists pushing governments to take action that is as dramatic as the threats posed by the climate crisis.

“The Climate Emergency movement reached a tipping point”
“This year, the Climate Emergency movement reached a tipping point, and thousands of average people began getting involved in climate politics and advocating for change,” Laura Berry, director of research and publications at The Climate Mobilization wrote to *The Verge* in an email. Her Brooklyn-based advocacy group has been behind a campaign to push for emergency declarations across the globe. Berry’s organization has worked alongside grassroots groups to push for local declarations and has lobbied Congress, too. She says the global climate emergency movement has exploded in growth this

year as campaigns from both her group and other efforts have taken hold.

In the final year of the hottest decade on record, climate emergency declarations have grown in scale from individual cities to an entire continent sounding the alarm. In May 2019, the UK became the first national government to declare a climate emergency, days after similar declarations from Scotland and Wales.”By November, the European Parliament had done the same. That month, more than 11,000 scientists jointly declared that Earth is “clearly and unequivocally” facing a climate emergency, too. Oxford Dictionaries made “climate emergency” its word of the year.

Today, about 800 million people live in places that have declared global warming an emergency – that’s one in ten of all people on the planet. It’s a big change in the three years since Darebin, Australia declared the first local emergency in 2016. On January 1st, 2019, The Climate Mobilization recorded just 233 declarations worldwide compared to the 1,288 today. For the most part, those declarations aren’t binding and rarely include any specific changes in policy, but in some cases, they have bolstered more concrete efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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New York City became the world’s largest city to declare climate emergency in June. That declaration “calls for an immediate emergency mobilization to restore a safe climate” without much detail on how it would do that. But it came on the heels of the city council passing a package of climate bills it dubbed its own Green New Deal, which most notably commits the city to making its buildings more energy-efficient in order to slash greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by 2050.

“If we want to stop climate catastrophe, we have to tell the

truth," Ash Sanders, a member of the environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion, said in a statement when New York City made its declaration. "We have ten years to transform our consumer behavior, our economy, and our culture to preserve life on earth. By declaring a climate emergency, the city is taking a major step in that process," Sanders said.

These declarations can also give municipalities a way to declare their priorities especially when their preferences clash with policy decisions made at higher levels. In the US — the second biggest greenhouse gas polluter in the world — cities, counties, and states have stepped up their efforts on climate change while President Trump has rolled back environmental protections. Local climate policies that are already on the books in the US are poised to cut down greenhouse gas emissions 25 percent by 2030 (compared to 2005 levels), according to a December report from Bloomberg Philanthropies. When South Portland, Maine adopted a resolution declaring a climate emergency in October, it included a vow to cut its greenhouse gas emissions down to zero by 2030.

Sixty-eight cities, towns, and counties have issued their own emergencies in the US. Sixty of those were made in 2019, and include major cities like Miami and Austin.

Though the movement started with smaller governments, it's caught on with bigger stakeholders, too. Nine nations — including Portugal, Argentina, Bangladesh, and Canada — also decided that the threat of climate change warranted an emergency declaration.

The EU became the biggest bloc yet to declare an emergency
When the EU became the biggest bloc yet to declare an emergency, it put pressure on leaders to raise the bar on their climate commitments. "We can take that resolution from the European Parliament and say 'Look, you said this was an emergency, so now act like it's an emergency,'" Jonathan

Gaventa, a senior associate and board member of the environmental think tank E3G, told *The Verge.* Soon after the declaration, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen proposed the EU's Green Deal, which puts the EU on the path to eliminate its greenhouse gases by 2050.

Meeting that 2050 goal globally is what scientists believe is necessary to avoid catastrophic climate change. It's a tall order that would require a near complete transition away from the world's dependence on fossil fuels. Without doing so, nearly all of the world's coral reefs are expected to die off, an additional 61 million people will deal with extreme droughts across the world's cities, and 70 percent of the world's coastlines will shrink under rising sea levels.

2020 could be a big year for climate emergencies, too
With so much on the line, 2020 could be a big year for climate emergencies, too. Democratic presidential candidates in the US have put declaring a national climate emergency on their agenda as they hit the campaign trail for elections next year. Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) introduced a resolution on it in July. Billionaire environmental philanthropist Tom Steyer has also said that he would make the declaration on the first day of his presidency if elected.

"This problem can't really be solved in the real world without it being prioritized and telling the world we're doing it right now on an expedited, urgent basis," Steyer told *The Verge* in an interview.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/27/21038949/climate-change-2019-emergency-declaration