

*Penn State Forward*

# **CLIMATE ACTION PLATFORM**

Updated January 15, 2022



## About Penn State Forward

Penn State Forward is a group of students and young alumni supporting three young, forward-thinking candidates for the Penn State Board of Trustees during the 2022 Alumni Trustee Election: **Dr. Christa Hasenkopf**, **Dr. Edward Smith**, and **Dr. Farnaz Farhi**. The Penn State Forward platform includes commitments and initiatives to advance climate action, educational equity, student safety, and transparent governance at Penn State.

## Candidate Biographies

**Dr. Christa Hasenkopf** ('03) is an atmospheric scientist who has focused her professional career on helping communities act on the severe public health and climate consequences of burning fossil fuels. Christa's Ph.D. in atmospheric science and body of work within the international environmental equity, public health, and open data communities prepares her to fight for climate action on the Board of Trustees.

**Dr. Ed Smith** ('06, '10) is a former Black Caucus president who built coalitions to fight for a just, safe, and culturally inclusive campus. As the co-chair of the Kresge Foundation's Equity Task Force, Ed audits their investment portfolio; he worked to initiate divestment from funds that contrast their Environmental Program's strategy of building climate-resilient communities and will bring this background in socially and environmentally responsible investing to the Board of Trustees.

**Dr. Farnaz Farhi** ('10) is an OBGYN who has spent 15 years studying sexual violence and caring for its victims and survivors. Farnaz's expertise in health equity enables her to see the connections between community health, social inequities, and climate change. Farnaz knows Penn State can be a leader in combating the climate crisis and is excited to work with Christa, Ed, and community experts to motivate greater university action.

**All Penn State alumni or former degree-program students are eligible to vote in the alumni trustee election, which will take place from April 15<sup>th</sup> 2022 to May 5<sup>th</sup> 2022 9 AM EST. Stay updated by completing the form at [www.psuforward.org/commit](http://www.psuforward.org/commit).**

## Platform Modifications

This platform has been created after review of existing research about Penn State's practices and extensive conversations with students, staff, faculty, and alumni. In alignment with our desire to move Penn State *forward*, we welcome suggestions at [team@psuforward.org](mailto:team@psuforward.org). And in alignment with our fourth pillar — transparent governance — we will note platform modifications and our rationale on our last page.

## Executive Summary

The Penn State Forward slate seeks to continue Penn State’s leadership in addressing climate change. Specifically, as members of the Board of Trustees, we will aim to:

1. Support the creation of sustainability learning outcomes and a Solar Energy Engineering major to ensure students remain competitive in a changing job market
2. Achieve a carbon-neutral Penn State by 2035 by supporting the recommendations of Penn State’s Carbon Reduction Task Force
3. Divest from fossil fuels and develop transparent and robust socially responsible investment practices
4. Collaborate with Pennsylvania’s state-related schools to invest in additional renewable energy projects and jobs in Pennsylvania

## Background

Climate change globally threatens people’s livelihoods, safety, and lives; sea-level rise, ocean warming, and intense droughts occur and will continue to occur with increasing severity because of this international crisis. These effects are seen in Pennsylvania too, as Pennsylvania’s climate has *already* undergone warming of more than 1°C (1.8° F) and climate change’s effects on the commonwealth include “flooding, agricultural losses, and expansion of vector-borne diseases,” like Lyme Disease.<sup>1</sup> These problems disproportionately affect our world’s and the Commonwealth’s most marginalized communities.

Penn State has already formed several partnerships to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80% below 1990 levels by 2050, including a 25-year Solar Power Purchase Agreement and additional use of renewable energy. Faculty member Michael Mann and Office of Physical Plant staff member Rob Cooper<sup>2</sup> are recognized nationally as climate leaders.

Still, Penn State can do more. In 2020, Penn State students formed the Penn State Climate Action Coalition, which created a set of aspirations and a list of strategies. Their specific recommendations — endorsed by Penn State’s four major student governments — are as follows:

- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions as rapidly as possible, setting a specific date between 2030 and 2040 for reaching net-zero emissions.

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<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania Dept. of Environmental Protection. (2022). “Climate Change Impacts.” *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*. Accessed Jan 5, 2022, from <https://www.dep.pa.gov/Citizens/climate/Pages/impacts.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Charles, Dan. (2019, Oct. 4). “How Penn State is Cutting Greenhouse Gas Emissions In Half — And Saving Money.” *NPR*. Accessed Jan 5, 2022, from <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/04/764637564/how-penn-state-is-cutting-greenhouse-emissions-in-half-and-saving-money>

- Prioritizing research efforts into carbon-capture technology, agricultural carbon sequestration, and carbon-neutral fuels, and using our institutional partnerships to accelerate their deployment.
- Improving efforts to incorporate sustainability education into existing curriculum.
- Creating a Climate Action Commission made up of Penn State experts charged with the capacity to study, set policy, assess, and publish progress on our climate commitments.
- Reallocating a portion of the existing student fee towards sustainability initiatives.
- Divesting from fossil fuels and investing in the green economy, especially energy efficiency, renewable energy sources, and zero-emissions transportation.<sup>3</sup>

Due to this group's advocacy and student support, the University Park Student Fee Board implemented an Environmental Sustainability Fund annually accruing \$250,000 from student-initiated fees<sup>4</sup> and Penn State charged the Carbon Emissions Reduction Task Force with "identify[ing] and evaluat[ing] short- and long-term operational strategies for lowering carbon emissions on all of Penn State's campuses."<sup>5</sup>

We seek to continue this work with a four-pronged plan.

## Education

In 2020, Penn State's faculty senate called on Penn State to "significantly increase investment in academic... initiatives focused on climate science, solutions, and management that are grounded in a spirit of transdisciplinary, collegiality, and active hope."<sup>6</sup> Penn State can invest in academic initiatives and ensure that this investment reaches all students by **constructing sustainability general education requirements and learning outcomes that apply to all students.**

In addition, Penn State has the capacity to be a national leader and equip students with the education required to be national leaders in renewable energy by **developing a Solar Energy major.** Currently, Penn State offers a Solar Energy Graduate Credit certificate and an Energy

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<sup>3</sup> Penn State Climate Action. (2021). "Strategy." *Penn State Climate Action*. Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from <https://psuclimateaction.weebly.com/aspiration.html>

<sup>4</sup> Long, Matthew. (2021, Aug. 10). "University Park Student Fee Board Approves New \$250K Environmental Sustainability Fund." *Penn State News*. Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from <https://www.psu.edu/news/campus-life/story/university-park-student-fee-board-approves-new-250k-sustainability-fund/>

<sup>5</sup> LaJeunesse, Sara and Heather Hottle Robins. (2021, Sep. 3). "Task Force Created to Significantly Reduce Penn State's Carbon Emissions." *Penn State News*. Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from <https://www.psu.edu/news/impact/story/task-force-created-significantly-reduce-penn-states-carbon-emissions/>

<sup>6</sup> Robinson, Brandi and Peter Buck. (2020, Apr. 28). "Faculty Senate Climate Action Resolution." University Faculty Senate. Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from <https://senate.psu.edu/senators/agendas-records/april-28-2020-agenda/appendix-c/>

Engineering major and minor. The coursework required for these programs could be modified and expanded to create this major and combined with coursework in philosophy/ethics, geography, and supply chain management to ensure the program is transdisciplinary in nature. Developing this major now, as renewable energy sources become more popular, enables Penn State to proactively add degree offerings that educate 21st-century students and keep Penn State students competitive in our changing economy.

## Campus

Penn State's campuses and communities can become leaders and models of environmentally sustainable communities; by proactively investing in green infrastructure, reducing waste, and creating a carbon neutral university, Penn State can save money in the long run, protect Pennsylvania's communities, and attract students, faculty, and donors from across the country. The Mueller Report illuminated that practice and policy changes and energy savings investments in the Mueller building could "save the Eberly College of Science nearly half a million dollars per year"<sup>7</sup> and the 2018 Waste Stream Task Force illuminated that Penn State spends over a million dollars in waste disposal each year.<sup>8</sup> In the light of human health impacts of climate change and this potential financial savings, we support greening our campus by championing three things: **carbon-neutrality, zero-waste practices, and locally and sustainably grown food.**

We believe Penn State should **become a carbon neutral university by 2035** by implementing expert recommendations in alignment with this goal. This includes the recommendations of Penn State's recently formed Carbon Emission Reductions Task Force.

Further, Penn State must **change procurement practices and institutional policy to reduce waste.** Currently, Penn State's University Park campus generates around 20,000 tons of waste each year. With costs of disposal that start at \$20/ton for recyclables that are source-separated and contamination-free, that increases to values from \$70/ton for municipal waste to as high as \$250/ton for recyclables with high contamination rates.<sup>9</sup> The amount of trash that is produced each year is not only environmentally unsound — and harmful to surrounding Pennsylvania communities — but also an economic burden on the University. Peer institutions like the University of Michigan<sup>10</sup> have benchmarked waste creation and set goals to reduce this waste by implementing new waste programs and reducing waste through procurement mechanisms. We

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<sup>7</sup> Penn State Green Destiny Council. (2000). The Mueller Report: Moving Beyond Sustainability Indicators to Sustainability Action at Penn State. Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from <https://p2infohouse.org/ref/17/16968.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Kessler Consulting, Inc.. (2019). Pennsylvania State University: Solid Waste System Assessment of the University Park Campus.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> University of Michigan. (2020). "Waste Reduction." *Office of Campus Sustainability*. Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from <https://ocs.umich.edu/sustainability-goals/waste-reduction-goal/>

should do the same, including by — as Board of Trustees members — overseeing prioritization of environmental impact and waste disposal costs in institutional procurement practices.

Lastly, we must **make our food purchasing habits transparent and prioritize food grown locally, and produced fairly, ecologically soundly, and humanely**. As noted on the most recent Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) Sustainability Tracking & Rating System (STARS) Report, which is a report that enables “colleges and universities to measure their sustainability performance,” gave Penn State a 0.00/6.00 in the area of “Food and Beverage Purchasing” due to a lack of transparency.<sup>11</sup> As a land grant institution, with a history of being an agriculture college and serving the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, this is embarrassing. We must — like our peer institution the University of Pittsburgh and AASHE — prioritize the purchase and use of “Real Food” as defined by the “Real Food Challenge,”<sup>12</sup> in institutional procurement practices.

## Endowment

As Penn State continues to invest in fossil fuels, this investment becomes increasingly morally reprehensible and financially irresponsible. Divesting from fossil fuels will demonstrate Penn State’s commitment to future generations of Penn Staters and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as climate change’s effects grow. Divesting will also minimize long-term risks to the endowment.

The financial rationale, as explained by Harvard Forward:

“The price of renewable energy has decreased so steeply over the last decade that renewable energy is now the cheapest way to generate electricity in most of the world. Due to this trend, the fossil fuel sector has underperformed clean energy investments in the market in recent years, meaning that fossil fuel investors have lost significant amounts of money and stand to lose even more the longer they take to divest. In fact, when the UC system announced its decision to divest, the schools’ chief investment officer explained that their reasons for divesting were chiefly financial... the long-term negative costs for the planet of continued investment in fossil fuels far outweigh any potential immediate benefits we might reap from an environmentally harmful investment policy.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> AASHE Stars, “Pennsylvania State University,” 2017. Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from <https://reports.aashe.org/institutions/pennsylvania-state-university-pa/report/2017-09-14/OP/food-dining/OP-7/>

<sup>12</sup> “Real Food Standards 2.1” Real Food Challenge. Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from <https://www.realfoodchallenge.org/resources/implementation-product-shift-resources/real-food-standards-20/>

<sup>13</sup> Harvard Forward. (2020). “Policy Platform: Climate Justice & Responsible Investing.” Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fyDcuUwiWsv0CNkMyUho0msDo8kCXb0Q/view>

Many powerful and respected institutions of higher education — including American University, Brown University, Columbia University, Georgetown University, Harvard University, Middlebury College, the University of Cambridge, the University of California system, and the University of Michigan — have announced plans to divest from fossil fuels.<sup>14</sup>

All four of Penn State’s major recognized student governments support divestment from fossil fuels, as illustrated by their support of the Penn State Climate Action Petition’s demands. A referendum hosted by the University Park Undergraduate Association revealed that student support goes even further. The referendum gauged student support of divestment, revealing that of the 3,249 ballots cast for the referendum, 2,961 — 91% — agreed with the following statement:

“Penn State should (1) commit to divestment from its long-term holdings in fossil fuel asset classes as quickly as possible; (2) release information about its current holdings in fossil fuels; and (3) publicly comment on the proposed divestiture”<sup>15</sup>

Divestment from fossil fuels must be a part of an effort to increase ethical considerations in how Penn State chooses to invest money. Our plan for this holistic effort is outlined in Penn State Forward’s “transparent governance” platform.

## Collaboration

Penn State must **invest in additional renewable energy projects**, like the recent solar array project, to bring jobs and economic growth to Pennsylvania. By **seeking partnerships with other Pennsylvania state-related schools** — Lincoln University, Temple University, and the University of Pittsburgh — we can participate in short-term cost-sharing to invest in long-term economic benefit. As members of the Board of Trustees, we will pursue these types of projects in alignment with creating a carbon-neutral university and fulfilling our land-grant mission.

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<sup>14</sup> Whitford, Emma. (2021, Apr. 28). “Divestment Gap Emerges.” Inside Higher Education. Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/04/28/divestment-gains-some-colleges-can-it-spread-where-oil-rules>

<sup>15</sup> Engel, James. (2021, Mar. 31). Penn State Students Vote ‘Yes’ on Referendum Calling on University to Divest from Fossil Fuels. *Daily Collegian*. Accessed Jan. 5, 2022, from [https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/campus/penn-state-students-vote-yes-on-referendum-calling-on-university-to-divest-from-fossil-fuels/article\\_45494244-928e-11eb-b070-3be3165e05c5.html](https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/campus/penn-state-students-vote-yes-on-referendum-calling-on-university-to-divest-from-fossil-fuels/article_45494244-928e-11eb-b070-3be3165e05c5.html)