

## TRANSCRIPT

### Environmental Insights

**Guest:** Amy Harder

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**Amy Harder:** This line in the [COP28 agreement](#) about transitioning away from fossil fuels, this will be cited in every protest and probably lawsuits in the coming years and decades and centuries, and that's a big deal.

**Rob Stavins:** Welcome to [Environmental Insights](#), a podcast from the [Harvard Environmental Economics Program](#). I'm your host, [Rob Stavins](#), a professor here at the [Harvard Kennedy School](#) and director of the program. On December 13th, the [28th Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) adjourned in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. What really happened at COP28 and perhaps what didn't happen? My guest today is very well positioned to offer some meaningful insights regarding those sorts of questions because I'm speaking today with [Amy Harder](#), the founding Executive Editor of [Cipher News](#), and formerly a reporter covering the energy sector and related policy at *Axios*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *National Journal*. Welcome Amy, to [Environmental Insights](#).

**Amy Harder:** Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here.

**Rob Stavins:** So in a few minutes, I'm eager to hear your assessment of [COP28](#), as well as your reflections and assessment on the current state of energy and climate change policy. But let's begin by going back to how you came to be where you are. So, where did you grow up?

**Amy Harder:** Yeah, happy to share. Well, I grew up on a cattle ranch, actually in eastern Washington state, and so really got a good understanding of how rural America and the agriculture industry works, which I think is helping me understand a lot of that in my role now. And so I grew up in Washington State, moved to D.C. and that's when I got into energy and climate journalism. And once I fell into the topic, sort of by luck, and by chance, I absolutely loved it. Even now I'm learning more and more, the more I cover it. And it's been almost 15 years now. And so, I moved to the other Washington for 12 years, and then moved back to Washington State in 2020 and love being here. I live now in Seattle and I run, as you mentioned, Cipher News, which we launched in 2021. And it's a news publication focused on covering climate solutions. And I know we'll get into this, but really the rise of publications like Cipher coincides with the rise of climate solutions themselves, and so it's a really exciting time.

**Rob Stavins:** Right. So Cipher is associated with [Breakthrough Energy](#), is that right?

**Amy Harder:** Yes.

**Rob Stavins:** Can you tell me about Breakthrough Energy and then what's the relationship between CIPHER and Breakthrough Energy?

**Amy Harder:** Yeah, definitely. Breakthrough Energy fully supports CIPHER financially, and Breakthrough Energy, as you may know, is a network of organizations and initiatives funded by Bill Gates to support climate solutions, particularly climate technologies. And there's several different initiatives, including one most people probably have heard of, which is the Venture Fund, which is one of the most prolific funders of climate technologies. There's other programs as well, including a fellows program that funds early, early stage entrepreneurs and technologies, and then a later stage initiative called Catalyst that seeks to help fund first of their kind commercial projects. And where CIPHER comes in is, really an education initiative to help educate the world on the climate technologies that we will need and the challenges facing them. One, perhaps your readers have heard of, Kaiser Health News, which although is in the health space, it's also funded by in part the Kaiser Family Foundation. And so, we're actually using the Kaiser Health News model as sort of a north star for CIPHER as well in terms of helping educate people for KHN, it's healthcare, and for CIPHER, it's climate.

**Rob Stavins:** I see. So, as you mentioned, Amy, you've seen some evolution in the coverage of climate change. You've seen evolution in how the energy sector is covered because you've been doing this, if my counting is correct, for almost 15 years. How is the coverage, I don't mean your personal coverage, but your observations of journalism more broadly, how has coverage of energy, and of course more recently climate change, changed over that time?

**Amy Harder:** It's changed significantly in a couple of different ways, I think. Looking more through the journalism lens, I think you're seeing more the rise of niche publications like CIPHER, but there's others as well, such as Canary Media, and Heatmap News are both two other media outlets that have emerged in just the last couple of years to focus on climate technology, specifically. And I think you're seeing that because there's a growing consensus that there's a public service need for coverage in this area, which is just simply massive. So there's certainly deep demand for all different types of coverage in this space. And so, that's more from the journalism lens.

Looking at the context of the climate and energy debate specifically, this decade of the 2010s was really about the oil and gas boom in the United States. And I spent time traveling the country covering fracking. I went to North Dakota with the then Interior Secretary Sally Jewell under then President Obama. It's a little bit unheard of to think of an Interior Secretary under a Democratic president sort of extolling the benefits of fracking but that was what was happening in the early part of last decade.

Fast-forward to today, and the concerns, and worries, and urgency of climate change has grown so loud that really the role of fossil fuels has shifted from the

economic benefits that they provide to the massive environmental impact that they have. And now it would be unheard of to think of the Interior Secretary going, at least under a Democratic president, I should emphasize. And so that has really been a shift in the public discourse, at least here in the United States. I will say though, that President Biden is overseeing a historic increase in oil and gas production. The US is the world's largest oil and gas producer by far. I think we're around 13 million barrels a day up from 9 million just a few years ago. So those things are really happening concurrently, but the urgency of climate change has really taken a precedent and rightly so, I would argue.

**Rob Stavins:** So some of that's truly is due to the fact that climate change is taken more seriously now, and certainly it's thought of much more as in the present as opposed to 50 years or 100 years out. But I also wonder if some people might not think that one of the reasons for that difference you've observed between the Obama Administration giving that attention to fracking, and then the Biden Administration approach might be due to the fact that the Obama Administration was, on reflection, fundamentally more moderate, less, further left than the current Biden Administration. Is that possibly part of the explanation?

**Amy Harder:** I'm not sure if I would agree with that actually. As a journalist, I'm always encouraging healthy disagreements. So, I might argue that it's because of course Joe Biden was the vice president before he was president, he was the VP in Biden and Obama's Administration. I would argue it's less that Biden has moved himself to the left, that the left being an imperfect way to say more attention on climate change. It shouldn't be the case that left is climate, but nonetheless, that's how it can be characterized in our politics. I would argue it's less that Biden is more liberal; it's more the case that the problem itself is more urgent. I think if Obama was somehow president now, he would be doing very similar actions.

**Rob Stavins:** Is that right? So I'm not suggesting that Biden has changed since he was vice president, but when I look at the executive office of the president, when I look at the White House staff, these are very, very different people than were on the White House staff, at least in the energy and environmental realm in the Obama years. Now, that may be because of the fact, as you said, that may again be due to the fact that the problem is considered more pressing than it was earlier when in the Obama years there was a lot more attention, obviously to US health policy, certainly initially.

**Amy Harder:** It's a really interesting question. I think when change happens, change happens both to the person and to the surroundings, and it can be hard to know what's the dominant cause, but I'm certain change is happening all around.

**Rob Stavins:** Right. Well, we'll leave it to historians, or political scientists, or whomever, or journalists, 10 years from now to look back when they can better reflect on the changes, and identify some of those causes. But for us, let's come up to the present, and let's turn to COP28. Before we delve into some of the specifics,

which I do want to do, can you tell me was there anything that was a surprise to you about COP28 in Dubai, or perhaps something that was a disappointment to you about COP28?

**Amy Harder:**

I would say one thing that surprised me, and maybe I'm just so jaded at this point, but I was surprised that the oil producing countries agreed to the main statement that it has embodied the COP28 consensus, the UAE consensus. I know we'll get into that. But I thought there was so much debate building up to this COP of, is it appropriate to have an oil producing country lead a COP, and not only an oil producing country, but the head of an oil company, be the COP28 president?

I think the results, although not perfect, and certainly not as strong as some delegates had wanted, it's certainly stronger than I had anticipated. In this topic, energy and climate change where change happened slowly, I think this change was relatively clear and sudden. I think this line in the COP 28 agreement about transitioning away from fossil fuels, this will be cited in every protest, and probably lawsuits in the coming years, decades, and centuries. And that's a big deal. Even if it wasn't a phase out or phase down, it still was stronger than I had thought was possible.

**Rob Stavins:**

So, would you say the same thing about the stated aspirations in the closing statement about tripling global renewable energy capacity, and doubling the annual rate of energy efficiency improvements or were those more expected?

**Amy Harder:**

I see those as more expected because they're less of a threat to fossil fuel companies and fossil fuel countries. And so far being the last three decades, we've really only had an energy addition. We think of it, we call it the energy transition, but we actually have only added clean energy on top of oil, natural gas, and coal. We actually haven't even begun the process of displacing fossil fuels with clean energy. That's because of growing energy demand, and a lot of other factors that we can get into. But those two goals, they're tripling renewable energy, and energy efficiency goals, those can happen even while we continue being dependent upon fossil fuels. So, those were less surprising to me than this line about transitioning away from fossil fuels.

**Rob Stavins:**

Now, this was officially the [Global Stocktake](#) COP because it was the conclusion of this first five-year period when the Global Stocktake would take place. I assume that the basic conclusion of the Global Stocktake is that globally countries of the world in aggregate are not on a trajectory to meet the [Paris Agreement](#) targets. Was that a surprise, or was that obvious going into the COP?

**Amy Harder:**

That was pretty obvious because there's been a lot of reports, and frankly sometimes too many reports that say the world is not on track to meet the Paris Climate Agreement goals. On the one hand, it can grow a little bit tiring to see those headlines. On the other hand, it's important to remind people, and continue to continuously emphasize a point if it's not getting the intention it needs. So, although that wasn't a surprise, what I think it's important to note,

which gets much less coverage, is that we've actually reduced the potential warming, and the warming that we're on track to experience by, I think it's something like half a degree Celsius, which is quite significant compared to pre-Paris Climate Agreement projections.

So yes, we're still not on track, but let's say you're training for a marathon, and when you started you couldn't run a mile at all, and then now you can run a mile at 20 minutes a mile. Do you still have a long ways to go to run a marathon? Yes. But have you made significant progress? Yes, those two things can coexist.

**Rob Stavins:** A tremendous amount of progress has been made. If you go back much earlier, to much earlier COPs relying on two volumes back of the intergovernmental panel on climate change then this is way before Paris, then the status quo predictions of warming in the current century ranged from four degrees centigrade to seven degrees centigrade. Obviously we're way down from that. And the [Kigali Amendments](#) shaved another half degree off. So, things are vastly better than they were, even though they don't match with the Paris commitment.

**Amy Harder:** Definitely. I think that it does not get enough attention. I think that's partly because we don't often look in the rearview mirror, but it's instructive to look in the rearview mirror because if past is precedent, which I would argue it is, then that says a lot about the moment we're in after Dubai. There's been a lot of change that has happened since the Paris Climate Agreement because of what that agreement said. I would argue the same will be the case here. I think one really fascinating observation that I know a lot of us have made since coming back from Dubai is just the sheer amount of climate technology companies and entrepreneurs that were there in Dubai. Your writeup of it, Rob, talked about quoting a colleague that said it's the Climate Expo 2023. I don't know if you said that yourself or you quoted somebody else.

**Rob Stavins:** No, that's my line actually.

**Amy Harder:** It's okay. Okay, let's correct it right there.

**Rob Stavins:** You can blame me for that.

**Amy Harder:** No, it's a great line and it's completely true. I hosted a four-hour climate innovation forum where we heard from Bill Gates, the founder of Breakthrough Energy, and a whole slew of entrepreneurs trying to commercialize everything from fusion to energy storage to a whole host of other technologies. And this was really the first COP that Breakthrough Energy had a very big public presence, and that's, I think, a sign of the times. And we need that. We need sort of two to three different ledgers of climate action, and one is over time reducing fossil fuels, but two, commercializing the technologies that will replace them. And that's what we saw in Dubai, and that's really significant. We may not see that exact presence [at] every single cop, these COPs kind of ebb and flow,

as I know you know well more than most people, Rob, but I think we've set a new floor of the type you will... We can expect to see climate entrepreneurs attending COPs much more in the future now, and I think that's significant, and we will only see that more as the Dubai consensus percolates into our society.

**Rob Stavins:**

Interestingly, Amy, there were participants at the COP and then observers from around the world, from the environmental advocacy world, not all of them, but some of them who actually criticized this conference of the parties for precisely that reason, not simply the high level of participation by the oil and gas sector, but by private industry as a whole, by the trade show elements of it. And I take it that your view, which actually I share, is that that's a very constructive element of the annual conference, not a destructive element.

**Amy Harder:**

Yeah, I can certainly understand and empathize with those folks that cringe at this idea that it becomes a trade fair and there's just a lot of talk. I can understand that. The purists who are there for the negotiations, I can understand why they may not want all of this. The other parallel element is that there's some research that shows that there was a record number of fossil fuel representatives there, and that makes sense because you are in a fossil fuel producing country. But that's also something I can understand why people would have some concern there.

My response would be that yes, it makes sense that there can be some concern, that it gets a little bit carried away, but the alternative is that it's not there, and that means people aren't paying attention. I think it's good that we have people like Larry Fink and Bill Gates and all of these entrepreneurs there rather than not there. I mean, this is what humanity does on everything. We gather, we make things, we make big deals out of things, we host conferences and site events and receptions, and that's just what humanity does on every topic. Climate change is no exception to that, and so we should be welcoming that because it's a sign that the private sector is showing up, even if to some people it can be a little cringe-worthy.

**Rob Stavins:**

One aspect of the Paris Agreement, which although it's been completed as the Paris Agreement has, and the rule book written is still to some degree a work in progress and there was considerable disappointment about what happened in Dubai. I don't know if you followed that. I'm referring to developments that facilitate carbon markets in Article 6 of the agreement. Are you following that?

**Amy Harder:**

I follow that a little bit, certainly. Cipher did a series on the importance of finance to COP28 leading up to the conference and we did a whole article on carbon markets. That was definitely one of the most significant disappointments and unfinished business of COP, for sure. It really comes at a pivotal time for this industry, which has been facing a lot of investigations that raise a lot of questions about the efficacy of carbon offsets and the markets themselves. And so, hopefully at the next COP with the Global Stocktake and the statement about fossil fuels in not only the review mirror but in motion, without those big rocks on the table, hopefully negotiators can really focus and get more

resolution on the carbon markets question because it really is an essential part of managing carbon effectively in the decades and centuries to come.

**Rob Stavins:** It was striking to me that [IETA, the International Emissions Trading Association](#), which I've known, worked with for decades, I've never before seen them send out what you could characterize as an expression of negativity, of disappointment in a press release until [their brief press release](#) that followed the end of COP28 when they were very clear about their disappointment on what had happened and not happened with Article 6.2 and 6.4.

**Amy Harder:** Yeah. It's interesting comparing this COP to past ones, I think it was last year in Sharm el-Sheikh, which although I didn't go to, we sent a reporter there and she covered it. I remembered a lot more coverage and intention on carbon markets last year. Of course, the media isn't necessarily exactly reflective of the negotiations themselves. I do wonder because of everything else going on, there was just not enough oxygen in the room left over to get to that very important topic. And so some things had to be left for another day, and I guess it's good that there was agreement made on fossil fuels, but hopefully this will lay the foundation for a more significant agreement to occur on carbon markets next year, and of course, in the meetings leading up to COP29 and Azerbaijan, that obviously are almost as important as the main event.

**Rob Stavins:** Now, you mentioned Sharm el-Sheikh last year with COP27. What was certainly a surprise there, it was in the second week getting close to the end when the United States, the chief delegate John Kerry changed, reversed position on the Loss and Damage Fund and supported the existence of the fund. And then this year what happened was that money began to come into the fund. It's somewhere between 500 million dollars and 700 million dollars now that's been pledged for the fund. Now, that's a small amount compared to what the demand side will eventually be, which is not in the millions or billions, but in the trillions of dollars. But did you see what happened this year with the Loss and Damage Fund as encouraging, or was it also something that just is not enough?

**Amy Harder:** When we talk about a problem as massive as climate change, I think I have to answer your question as both. It's both encouraging but also not enough. I think it was interesting and very strategically smart on behalf of the UAE government to come out of the gate on basically the first day of COP in Dubai with an agreement on loss and damage.

**Rob Stavins:** Yes, absolutely.

**Amy Harder:** That was really set to be a controversial point that was really taken off the table relatively quickly in a positive way. They've agreed on the fund. It's going to be housed in the World Bank, at least for the time being. Certainly, 700 million is not even a drop in the bucket. So, that's the disappointment part. That being said, the disagreement about how to operate it was a really important one and that needed to be settled before money could start flowing. So, hopefully that will occur. Of course, we know getting more money for climate adaptation

funding globally in the U.S. is extremely difficult with the politics there, but I think overall there was positive movement in the finance area. The UAE teamed up with global financiers and philanthropies to pledge more than \$80 billion in climate financing, and that includes a 30 billion dollar special fund that the government in Abu Dhabi and BlackRock CEO Larry Fink was there, agreed to set up.

The Emiratis have money to spend on this and they showed up with that. But like you said, I think the latest figures show that eventually lower income countries will need \$1 trillion a year to address climate change, and that's just a massive amount. We really need to think about climate change costs in two ways. There's the cost of adapting to a warmer world, but also mitigating climate change with new technologies, and that's a whole different set of technology costs. So, I think much more to come here, but again, a surprisingly positive outcome.

**Rob Stavins:**

So, let's step back then from COP 28. Take the outcome of COP 28 as you perceive it, combine it with your observations about climate policy action in the United States, not what you'd wish it to be, but what it is and is likely to be given politics and political uncertainty, combining what's happening in Europe, combining what's happening in China and other parts of the world, does all of that leave you as an optimist or a pessimist? Which side of the coin would you place yourself in terms of progress on climate change going forward?

**Amy Harder:**

I'm definitely on the optimist side, but pretty close to the side that you would flip over to become a pessimist, so a realist perhaps would be my plan C, option C there. There's a lot of markers that indicate we will be heading in the right direction. I am choosing my words carefully by saying "we will be heading" because we're probably going to see in the weeks ahead headlines like record fossil fuel consumption, record oil demand. And it is true that before change can be seen on the ground, prompted by the Dubai agreement, that things don't change overnight. Something that I think about a lot in this topic of energy and climate change, because change happens so slowly and over decades and centuries, it can be hard to see when change actually happens. There's only a few times, I think the Paris Agreement was one, I would put Dubai in that category, that when we look back, this will be a moment of clear change, even if it may not look like clear change to everybody.

So, I'm definitely optimistic. I think the fact that we've reduced global warming already by a significant amount, I think that's a good sign that we will have even more progress in the weeks and months and years ahead. The caveat, the yes but part of this conversation, is there's a lot of other geopolitical crises going on right now that are rightfully, understandably, taking some attention away from climate change. Just today there was some news about how the European Union is diverting climate spending to immigration and defense, and that makes sense, one could argue, when there's multiple wars happening on this planet and immigration issues are getting out of hand. And so, I think the momentum that we need for climate change is momentum we need for decades and



centuries, and that can be tiring up against these other geopolitical crises. So that's my word of caution, but overall I think there's a lot of positive signs for momentum, even more so in the future.

**Rob Stavins:** So, listen, those notes of both optimism and realism are a wonderful place to conclude our conversation. So, thank you very much, Amy, for having taken time from your schedule to join me today.

**Amy Harder:** You're welcome. Thanks so much for having me. This was a lot of fun.

**Rob Stavins:** My guest today has been [Amy Harder](#), the Executive Editor of [Cipher News](#) by Breakthrough Energy. Please join us again for the next episode of [Environmental Insights: Conversations on Policy and Practice](#) from the [Harvard Environmental Economics Program](#). I'm your host, [Rob Stavins](#). Thanks for listening.

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