

## TRANSCRIPT

### Environmental Insights

**Guest:** Jonathan Banks

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**Jonathan Banks:** I'm just so amazed at how much attention and action I've seen on methane mitigation, and that's a huge change because I've been coming to the COP for a long time, and we've never ever seen anything like this.

**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.

But today, we're in Dubai at the [28th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework, Convention on Climate Change, better known as COP 28](#), and we're very fortunate to have with us [Jonathan Banks](#), who has had a great deal of experience in these negotiations, and actually with climate change policy more broadly. Jonathan is currently the global director of the [Methane Pollution Prevention Program](#) at the [Clean Air Task Force](#). Welcome, Jonathan.

**Jonathan Banks:** Thanks for having me, Rob.

**Rob Stavins:** I'm interested really to hear your impressions of COP 28 here in Dubai. But before we talk about that, let's just go back briefly to how you came to be where you are. Our listeners are always interested to hear this. So let's start with where did you grow up?

**Jonathan Banks:** Well, I'm originally from Texas. I grew up north of Dallas, and what was a somewhat small town at the time. It's not so small anymore. Denton, Texas. I spent most of my young life in Texas, went to school at the University of Texas in Austin and then left Texas and have never been back since.

**Rob Stavins:** Now, when you left Texas, I don't know if it was immediately when you left or with some delay, but I believe you were a Peace Corps volunteer in the Republic of the Congo. Is that right?

**Jonathan Banks:** That's correct. It was about a year after graduating. My wife and I both went together. We both had met through both of our desires to join the Peace Corps and ended up going together as a couple, and we were in Republic of Congo working on a program called WASH, which is Water and Sanitation and Health Education, but we ended up doing a lot of other things like working on better efficient stoves for home cooking, things like that.

**Rob Stavins:** That's interesting because this is something that, at least partially, we have in common. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, but I was in West Africa in Sierra Leone, and probably about two decades before you were. And at least for me, and I worked in agriculture, lowland rice development, and it was a fundamentally important experience for me. I always say that, other than meeting my wife, which was later, and having children, that was the most defining moment, I think, or event of my life.

**Jonathan Banks:** It definitely has that ability to really redirect how you think and view the world. Unfortunately, our Peace Corps service was cut a little bit short because we had a civil war in Congo that broke out and we were evacuated out of the country, which is a whole other story for some other time.

**Rob Stavins:** I can imagine. Now, you left the Congo, you worked as a legislative assistant in the U.S. House of Representatives, which I'll mention for our international audience is the lower body in the bicameral legislature, for a couple of years. Then I believe you were deputy director at the National Environmental Trust. Is that right?

**Jonathan Banks:** Yeah. When I was working on the Hill, I worked for a congressman who had a major role in the Energy and Commerce Committee, which is one of the biggest committees when it comes to the environment. And at that time, there was a big push on deregulation of the energy sector and there was some environmental groups that were seeking to attach to the deregulation push a piece of legislation that would clean up coal-fired power plants. So it became known as the Four Pollutants Bill. So, it was like CO<sub>2</sub>, Mercury, SO<sub>2</sub> NOX, and I ran the legislative side of that campaign to try to get that piece of legislation through.

**Rob Stavins:** So, after that, you importantly went, I believe, to the Clean Air Task Force where you've been for about the last 20 years. Is that right?

**Jonathan Banks:** It's coming up on 24 actually.

**Rob Stavins:** Wow.

**Jonathan Banks:** Yeah. I have to do the math every once in a while to remind myself. But yeah, I started with CATF in 1999, and have been working on a variety of projects since then, mostly working on methane though.

**Rob Stavins:** Well, congratulations on being at one employer for that long because it's unusual. I also share that with you. I've been on the faculty at Harvard for, I think 30, maybe it's 34 years now, something like that. So-

**Jonathan Banks:** It's not very common nowadays.

**Rob Stavins:** It's not. It's not common at all in any sector of the economy. So, let's now turn to where we are here in Dubai at COP 28. In a moment, I really do want to turn to your work, and more broadly what's happening at COP 28 with regards to methane. That's what I'd really like to bore in on. But before we do that, I'd just like to ask you in general, is there anything overall that strikes you about COP 28 as different from the previous COPs you've attended?

**Jonathan Banks:** Well, one thing that's never surprising is that they're all so wildly different. Every COP has its quirks and nuances. This one is massive. I heard the other day that they hit 100,000 people. It's just astounding to me to think that there's 100,000 people here for this thing.

**Rob Stavins:** Yeah, it doesn't feel that way at all.

**Jonathan Banks:** Yeah. I think that's partly because we're in Dubai where the city's not even blinking with 100,000 people coming into it. Other COPs, when a COP's in Bond, the entire city's taken over by the COP. The big thing, I think for me, and going a bit to what I work on, is I'm just so amazed at how much attention and action I've seen on methane mitigation, and that's a huge change because I've been coming to the COP for a long time, and we've never ever seen anything like this.

**Rob Stavins:** So, let's turn to that. Let's turn to methane. And I certainly agree, I had the same reaction that just the difference between COP 27 last year in Sharm El-Sheikh in Egypt and this year at COP 28 with regards to methane, is like night and day. It's really quite remarkable. Now, I'm sure you're focusing on various fronts, and in fact, to me, the methane realm exemplifies the fact that so much of the action, increasingly over time in the COPs, is outside of the negotiations, the UNFCCC negotiations themselves, and rather in the province of what the UNFCCC call Civil Society, and there's really quite a regime complex in the case of methane. So, I want to start though with the UNFCCC, and then we can go on to all these different consortia that are engaged on global methane emissions reductions. So, let's start with the Paris Agreement and the NDCs. I'm not sure that everyone will know. Tell us about the role of methane. I know it's 195 or so different nationally determined contributions, but does methane show up in those or not?

**Jonathan Banks:** It is starting to show up more and more. One of the big pushes over the last year has been to get every country to put methane into their NDC. You would think that the NDCs would all have some formula that everyone follows, but they don't. Every country approaches them in a slightly different way. Many times, countries will lump all greenhouse gases together and create one target for the total greenhouse gases, but the push has been to get explicit mentions of methane in their NDCs, and we've made a lot of progress in that space over the last year to get a really high percentage of members of the [Global Methane Pledge](#) with methane into their NDC. And the new push really is to go beyond that and to get countries to set specific targets for methane in their NDCs. There's not as many countries that have those, but just recently China and the United States agreed to do that in their next round.

**Rob Stavins:** And that agreement to do that in the next round, was that part of the [Sunnylands Statement](#) that came out, or is that something that actually took place here in Dubai?

**Jonathan Banks:** That came out of Sunnylands.

**Rob Stavins:** It did. You mentioned the [Global Methane Pledge](#), so let's start there. Start in the sense of, now moving outside of the Paris Agreement itself. Although the Global Methane Pledge is among governments, a lot of people I find who are outside of this process and don't follow it closely don't realize that the Global Methane Pledge is itself outside of the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement. The Global Methane Pledge, I guess, was launched about 18 months ago originally by the United States and the European Commission, and then it was relaunched at the last year's COP, at least with photo opportunities. But it's taken some very significant steps forward here. Can you tell us about those?

**Jonathan Banks:** The Pledge is outside the UNFCCC process, and by design it is. The UNFCCC process is, for all its positives it does have some faults in that it is extremely cumbersome. It is difficult to move things at any speed through that process, and speed is what we need when it comes to methane. Methane is... The other day, Inger Andersen, the head of the United Nations Environment Program, described methane as our lifeboat and we have to take it. It is the thing that we need to do the fastest in order to start to bend the curve on methane emissions. And so being outside of the UNFCCC process at least gives the opportunity for greater speed. There are problems that come with that, of course, but there's definitely a reason for it being where it is. The agreement made really huge progress at this COP. The big kind of headline stuff was that there was over one billion dollars raised for new grant funding to support mitigation around the world. We had some really exciting new members of the Global Methane Pledge like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and Romania-

**Rob Stavins:** Who are very significant emitters at least, if not in total quantity, at least in terms of methane intensity, I believe.

**Jonathan Banks:** Yes, absolutely. If you look around at all the news media of the satellite imagery of large super emitter events, you will most likely find Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan in that mix of super emitter news stories. So, it's a really exciting thing to see both of them joining and joining eagerly. I had the pleasure of being in the room with both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and you didn't get the impression that they were simply waving a press release. You got the impression that they were really excited and eager to take this on. So, I think that's really exciting. I'm anticipating some additional announcements after the COP with both those countries that will provide a lot more details about the pathway forward for working with them to implement projects. So, that's really an exciting piece.

We saw several announcements of major pieces of legislation and regulation here at COP. The United States announced their final regulations for the oil and

gas sector, which could achieve up to an 80 percent reduction from the regulated sources it will cover. We saw the Canadian government announce their draft regulations, which we'll get about a 75 percent reduction from the oil and gas sector. And right before COP, we had the European Union finalize its regulations for oil and gas, and that also included, for the first time ever, a methane import standard, which will apply to all gas that is bought and sold into the E.U., which is huge because the E.U. imports gas from all over the world, and is the largest purchaser of globally traded gas.

So, the potential for that import standard to reduce emissions is massive, and we've calculated that out. We see... if we could get every country that currently exports to the European Union complying with the standard, we would get about a 30 percent reduction in total methane emissions from the oil and gas sector on a global basis. So, it's pretty astounding to think about. And so that's really exciting to me. But-

**Rob Stavins:** So that 30 percent-

**Jonathan Banks:** ... I should pause. Yeah.

**Rob Stavins:** Yeah. That 30 percent number is familiar because of course the Global Methane Pledge, which unlike what you were just laying out with meaningful, real-binding policies, is essentially voluntary. The Global Methane Pledge, a 30 percent reduction by the year 2030, is an aggregate pledge. Individual countries are not saying that they're going to reduce by 30 percent. What's your reaction to that kind of structure for the Global Methane pledge? I suppose that's why it's got such incredibly broad participation, what, 150 countries now or something, but is there a downside to that in your mind?

**Jonathan Banks:** No, I don't see a downside. The reason that it's a collective goal is the only alternative would be to set a target for each and every country. You can't just say, "We're going to get a 30 percent or a 40 percent or a 50 percent reduction in methane emissions," because every country's methane inventory is different. If you're New Zealand, and all of your methane emissions comes from the agriculture sector, specifically cows and sheep, you have a very different profile of how emissions can be reduced versus if you are the United States who has a tremendous amount of oil and gas methane emissions. And that's because the economics as well as the technology available are very different for those two sectors.

So, the pledge was specifically designed with that in mind to allow for that flexibility within the emission inventories so that countries wouldn't be pushed away from joining and making progress. If we had just chosen a specific target and said, "Every country has to meet this," I don't think we would've gotten very far. Even within the oil and gas sector, what one country can get versus another country is very different based on the kinds of infrastructure they might have in their country.

**Rob Stavins:** So, that's very helpful. So, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, that something that really characterizes what's going on with methane at the COP is that it is highlighting this regime complex that there are so many different institutions that are engaged, and we talked about one within the UNFCCC, the Paris Agreement and its NDCs. We've talked about one in some detail that's outside of that, but among governments, the Global Methane Pledge. I've got in front of me a list of five different, I don't know if some of them are venues, some of them are institutions, associations, and I'd love to get through all five if we can before we run out of time, because I think people will be very interested in this. And if on any of these I'm going to go through, if you could give us at a minimum a brief definition of what is it, or if you can also offer and you're comfortable to offer an assessment of its relatively importance, effectiveness, or anything else, the role it plays, let's do that. Is that okay with you?

**Jonathan Banks:** That sounds great.

**Rob Stavins:** Okay. So, we're going to start with the [International Methane Emissions Observatory](#).

**Jonathan Banks:** That's a good place to start. The IMEO is run... It sits within the United Nations Environment Program. And the whole purpose of the IMEO is to increase the clarity of emissions and our understanding of emissions data on a global basis. They are working with companies and countries and satellite providers to bring a tremendous amount of data forward to clarify where we're at with methane emissions, and do that in a way that allows for countries to really understand where everything sits in the order of methane. It is primarily focused on the oil and gas sector but it's going to be expanding to other sectors over time. It is going to publish a methane intensity index for the oil and gas sector sometime next year so that countries that buy gas will be able to see how much methane is associated with the gas that I'm purchasing from country X or country Y. And then-

**Rob Stavins:** Is that going to be by country? If there are three different companies within that country, is it also by company or no?

**Jonathan Banks:** It will start most likely by country, but there's a real push to get to the company level, and even better, the basin level. So, within a country, you might have multiple basins of oil and gas in there and the emissions associated with one basin can often be wildly different from the emissions associated with another basin. And so the goal is to get really to the basins.

**Rob Stavins:** So, let me turn to another institution. You've mentioned now the ONG, the oil and gas sector. There's the [Oil and Gas Climate Initiative](#), the OGCI. What's that, and again, if you could tell us what you think of it?

**Jonathan Banks:** So OGCI has been around for a while now and they took on methane emissions as one of their key pieces within what they wanted to try to get their companies

to tackle. The OGCI targets are point two percent methane leakage which is kind of where people define the standard. It's an ill-defined standard of what we all want, but that's kind of where we're at for upstream oil and gas methane emissions. So, that's a pretty good standard. They've got a lot of very large international oil and gas companies as part of the mix and then a few of the wealthier national oil companies in the mix. And so they play a role in bringing industry along in this process, which is a helpful thing.

**Rob Stavins:** Right. Now there's also the [Climate and Clean Air Coalition](#), which I believe now has become the secretariat for the Global Methane Pledge. Tell us about that.

**Jonathan Banks:** So, I sit on the board of the Climate and Clean Air Coalition. CATF was one of the founding members of the CCAC. The CCAC is made up of about 70-ish governments and 70-ish civil society groups from around the world. It's completely dedicated to reducing short-lived climate pollutants, which methane is a short-lived climate pollutant, and also focused on that nexus between clean air, public health, and those short-lived climate pollutants, which there's a lot of that. The CCAC, beyond playing the role of the secretariat for the Global Methane Pledge, is also at the forefront of implementation of projects and support for policy development around the world. They bring in funding from a variety of sources, governments, and philanthropy, and then they go back out to countries to provide technical support, policy support, so that we can get methane mitigation projects moving or policies moving in many places around the world.

**Rob Stavins:** I see. Now already several times, the oil and gas sector has come up in discussion. What you're certainly familiar with, but not all of our listeners may know, that the oil and gas is certainly not the only sector for methane emissions and in some parts of the world, it's not the most important or even an important sector. There's also, of course, coal-bed methane, landfills, and also agriculture in both livestock and rice paddy development which in some parts of the [world is exceptionally important. I've come across something called the Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate or AIM for Climate](#). Have you come across them?

**Jonathan Banks:** Yeah. So, there's a lot of efforts to elevate the attention for agriculture methane. In the early days of the methane fight, a lot of us chose to focus on oil and gas because of the plethora of technologies that exist, the fact that those technologies are fairly inexpensive to deploy, and because there just wasn't a whole lot of us working on this stuff years ago, everybody tended to focus on oil and gas. That is changing a lot. There's a lot more attention going to the agriculture sector. Beyond the group you mentioned, there's also a huge effort around developing research and solutions for enteric fermentation, which is cows. And so it's really exciting to see so much attention coming for agriculture. And for a big reason is, if you look past 2030... We're all targeting 2030 is when we need to hit our 30 percent reduction target to keep 1.5 in reach. But after 2030, most of the methane emissions reductions are going to need to come

from the agriculture sector. That's where the growth will be. That's where we will have made the least progress.

And because of fewer solutions, because the costs are typically high and then it's just harder to deploy things, there really needs to be a lot of focus on developing more solutions and building out the science around this. So that's really exciting to see as we move, and those are some big things, I think happened here at the COP, is the unveiling of these, a lot more attention to this.

**Rob Stavins:**

So just the day before yesterday, I engaged in a fascinating chat or discussion with a gentleman who is running efforts at the [International Rice Research Institute](#) in the Philippines, focused on methane emissions reduction, looking both at changes in management practice, different kinds of cultivation, and then treatment of stubble, and also at plant breeding, which was of course the heart and soul of IRRI, what they did for many years, bringing us the Green Revolution. So, I think you're absolutely right, that that is going to be the future. At a COP, I don't know if it'll be five or 20 years from now, we're going to see a lot of attention to agriculture and methane, without a doubt. Now, finally, there are also the bilateral initiatives and unilateral initiatives; you mentioned some. And then one that you mentioned early on is the [Sunnylands, California China USA Agreement](#). That has struck me as very important. It will, obviously in a variety of ways that go beyond environment and climate change, but on climate change in particular it struck me as very important. Do you feel that way, or am I overstating its importance?

**Jonathan Banks:**

No, I definitely feel that way. I think that what we saw for the last year and a half or so or almost two years is that China and the U.S. weren't talking on climate or anything else, and that is never a good thing. When they're not talking, we're not making any progress. I know that John Kerry's team put in a massive amount of work to develop the relationship again in a way that allows for the U.S. and China to speak and to reach agreement and make progress. So, I'm really excited about that. The friendship that Kerry and Xie, the lead negotiator for the Chinese, is really paying dividends. And so I'm really optimistic about that going forward. It was a shame to have that relationship broken down for so long, but I'm really optimistic by the progress that's been made at Sunnylands and then continued here at COP as well.

**Rob Stavins:**

Well, that's very encouraging to hear. I'll tell you, very often when we talk about climate change, whether I'm talking with researchers, government people, or activists, there's a note of pessimism that inevitably comes up. So, this has been actually quite an uplifting conversation, at least for me, and I hope for our listeners. So, we're going to end with that. Thank you very much, Jonathan, for taking time to join me today. It's been a pleasure to be with you.

**Jonathan Banks:**

No, my pleasure, Rob. It's great to have you guys working on this stuff and looking forward to continuing to collaborate.



**Rob Stavins:**

Absolutely. So, our guest today has been [Jonathan Banks](#), the global director of the [Methane Pollution Prevention Program](#) at the [Clean Air Task Force](#). 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.

**Announcer:**

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