

How to Talk About Carbon Removal: A Communications Workshop

Meeting Report

September 18-19, 2019

University of Massachusetts Club

Boston, MA



INSTITUTE *for* CARBON REMOVAL
LAW AND POLICY

On September 18-19, 2019, the Institute for Carbon Removal Law and Policy (ICRLP) hosted a meeting titled “How to Talk About Carbon Removal.” The meeting was intended to facilitate a dialogue between stakeholders working on carbon removal and to provide a space to discuss strategies for improved communication of the topic. The outcomes of the meeting are informing an in-progress ICRLP report, being prepared by communications scholar Matthew Nisbet of Northeastern University, on carbon removal communication.

This meeting report summarizes the discussions and outcomes that emerged from the workshop.

I. Workshop Background

Carbon removal is a complex and sometimes contentious subject matter. Recent reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and elsewhere suggest that the removal of large amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere will almost certainly be needed to meet the targets established by the Paris Agreement. Recognition in scientific and some policy quarters that carbon removal will be needed has prompted an explosion of interest in “natural climate solutions” that could sequester carbon in forests or soils. In addition, some are suggesting that such responses will need to be supplemented with more speculative carbon removal methods like Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) or Direct Air Capture (DAC).¹ Yet investment in carbon removal research and development remains limited and the public conversation about carbon removal remains muted.

This workshop emerged from realization of the need to identify the chief challenges associated with enabling broad and informed social consideration of carbon removal options and to develop communications strategies that can help overcome those challenges. The workshop brought together a range of perspectives from academia, media, the philanthropic community, and civil society to discuss the emergent narratives and frames in the carbon removal conversation along with the lessons that could be drawn from existing scholarship in climate communications.

A secondary purpose of the workshop was to inform a report in preparation by Matthew Nisbet, set to be published in late Fall 2019. Nisbet’s report is designed to:

¹ For a primer on carbon removal options, see David Morrow et al. (2018) “Why Talk About Carbon Removal?” Institute for Carbon Removal Law and Policy, Washington DC, available at <https://carbonremov.al/whytalk>.

- 1) Concisely summarize the importance of carbon removal for readers not otherwise familiar with the topic.
- 2) Establish that there is no single audience for communication about carbon removal. The diversity of audience ranges from elites like policymakers, NGOs, journalists, scientists, and philanthropists to the general public engaged with climate and energy; or those who currently have the most to gain or lose from different carbon removal response options.
- 3) Discuss the key roles that intellectual traditions, narratives about climate change, energy, and politics play in shaping how different publics think and talk about carbon removal.
- 4) Emphasize the importance and need for dialogue-based forms of communication, giving specific examples.
- 5) Highlight the key role journalists and news organizations play in structuring the discussion of carbon removal technologies.
- 6) Provide a set of principles, guidelines, and recommendations for the type of research, investments, and support that will be needed to facilitate constructive dialogue-based communication about carbon removal technologies.

II. Workshop Process

Day 1: Wednesday, September 18th 2019

The first day of the meeting included an overview by experts of carbon removal approaches, an assessment of current domestic and international policies around carbon removal, and conversations with journalists covering the topic.

Matthew Nisbet opened the day with a presentation on the first section of his report in preparation, arguing for the need to ask critical questions about science and policy. Responses to Matt's talk included questioning who is funding carbon removal research and development, discussing the pros and cons of the "climate emergency" narrative, and an interrogation of a distinction that is often drawn between "natural" and "technological" carbon removal options.

The first panel session of the day included Jennifer Wilcox (Worcester Polytechnic Institute), Kelly Levin (World Resources Institute), and David Morrow (ICRLP), giving an overview of carbon removal approaches and their potential role in global and US climate policy.

Wilcox gave a thorough explanation of the different carbon removal approaches that are receiving varying levels of attention and investment, detailing their respective barriers and costs in addition to explaining the difference between carbon removal versus mitigating emissions. The approaches highlighted in Wilcox's presentation included direct air capture (DAC), afforestation, and bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS). Morrow's presentation centered around explaining *why* there needs to be consideration of carbon removal. He did this through an exercise utilizing En-ROADS, a fast-running climate simulation tool developed by Climate Interactive. Levin then explained the World Resources Institute's developing program looking at carbon removal and the nuances of scaling carbon removal in the U.S. Questions to this group included further explanation of direct air capture deployment, barriers to carbon removal, and direct air capture and fossil fuel investment in research and development.

The following session consisted of open conversation designed to provoke direct responses to and reflections on Nisbet's report in preparation. This working session produced three key puzzles that helped to guide the remainder of the workshop. These were:

- 1) The audience for carbon removal communication remains ill defined. At this point consideration of carbon removal is largely confined to policy and other elites. Is this appropriate and what does this mean for the development of communications strategies?
- 2) Carbon removal options are not a climate action silver bullet. Removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere can only ever be a complement to emissions abatement activities (that is, to the work of decarbonizing energy, transportation, and food systems) and to needed adaptation in the face of climate change. Yet there is a real danger that carbon removal could be seen or sold as a way to sidestep the messy politics that surround consideration of other climate change response options or could distract from needed work on those options. What does this danger mean for effective and nuanced communication about carbon removal?
- 3) Consideration of carbon removal is generating some new and unusual political alliances. For instance, fossil fuel companies are interested in using captured CO₂ for enhanced oil recovery – injecting CO₂ into oil wells to extract hard-to-get hydrocarbons. A portion of the injected CO₂ stays in the ground, leading some environmental groups and others to see enhanced oil recovery efforts as an important proof of concept and potential on-ramp for carbon removal developments. Others, though, see danger signs with oil company involvement in carbon removal discussions. How can such tricky political waters be navigated?

The last session of the first day centered around how journalists are approaching the task of reporting on carbon removal and was led by four journalists, Bruce Gellerman (WBUR), Lisa Palmer (SESYNC), David Abel (*Boston Globe*), and Oliver Morton (*The Economist*). They shared their experiences reporting on carbon removal and climate issues and how they approach reporting on complex issues such as these. Abel spoke about how the question “why does this story need to be written now?” drives his work. He emphasized that clarity and lack of advocacy are essential when talking to journalists. Palmer expressed that the role of journalists is to inform the public using accurate and correct information, not to simplify the hard facts. Morton spoke to the different framing devices used in the development of stories. The dichotomy of hope was also discussed with Morton pointing out that hope is necessary but also dangerous because those who have too much hope lack a clear urgency to act while those who have no hope do not believe anything can be done at all. Gellerman also presented on the importance of telling relevant stories backed by trusted resources on the radio. He uses the power of emotion to communicate the message to his listeners. A rigorous discussion followed this session that continued over dinner and into the next day.

Day 2: Thursday, September 19th, 2019

The second day of the workshop provided a space for the participants to discuss and create a carbon removal communications agenda outlining what more needs to be known and done. This was accomplished through two small breakout sessions focused on how to frame carbon removal stories and creating a journalist guide. One group was tasked with producing ideas and suggestions for a future journalist’s guide to carbon removal. The other group was asked to discuss how various narratives and storylines might better serve carbon removal communication.

III. Workshop Outcomes

In addition to the three puzzles identified above, a number of additional themes and lines of needed inquiry emerged from the presentations and discussions on Day 1 of the workshop. One was interrogation of the “climate emergency” narrative. While an “emergency” framing can encourage meaningful action on climate, does it detract from critical conversations, questions, and debates needed to make informed decisions about climate action? Another theme of discussion on Day 1 was the “why?” of carbon removal. Participants discussed the various motivations and implications of choosing to fund and develop certain carbon removal approaches over others. A further recurring element of discussion was the “how” for communications on

carbon removal. Meeting participants discussed the merits and challenges for public engagement in communications and how communications about carbon removal should or needs to be tailored for diverse audiences.

Thursday’s breakout group discussions built on these various themes. The group tasked with creating suggestions for a journalist guide to carbon removal identified a number of topics, questions, and challenges for journalists to consider when reporting on carbon removal. A major point in this discussion was that the implementation of carbon removal is often presented as inevitable and that the associated technologies are “just over the horizon.” In actuality, much more research, investment, and development would be required to deploy these approaches on a meaningful scale. Some suggestions for this future journalists’ guide, to be developed by ICRLP, are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Suggestions for Journalists’ Guide	
Previous Reporting	Corresponding Suggestions
Inaccurate depiction of the current scale and extent of deployment of carbon removal technologies	Include accurate scale and context for carbon removal approaches <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use examples from other industries
	Clarify the appropriate role of carbon removal in climate action
	Accurately discuss the nature of innovation and research & development
Unclear usage of carbon removal terms	Be clear and accurate in defining carbon removal-related terms
Sparse investigation into climate models	Question the assumptions of these models and the role of carbon removal approaches
Stories are framed to pit hope and doubt against each other	Frame stories to include a narrative of healthy skepticism

The group tasked with discussing climate conversations and storylines focused on three specific narratives. First, the narrative of hope: stories of what is happening, and working, on the technological side of things. This includes profiles of individuals and labs that capture the hope and enthusiasm of young scientists. Second, the narrative of disbelief: A response to the narrative of hope, this narrative reveals the optimism of engineers and scientists as naïve. This narrative exists because of those who are uncertain of how technology will be scaled up once it becomes feasible. Third, the narrative of cynicism: avoiding both hopelessness and naiveté. This framework acknowledges that technologies will become feasible, however, they will be secured

through large investments by big oil companies, stopping small scale interests from entering the carbon removal market. This group recognized that there are copious narratives of hope and cynicism and questioned if pushing for a new narrative of necessary skepticism is the path forward.

IV. Key Takeaways and Next Steps

This workshop provided critical guidance toward the finalizing of Nisbet’s report and the production of additional deliverables. Key takeaways include creating conversation frames emphasizing broad stakeholder engagement, the need for healthy skepticism in consideration of carbon removal claims, consensus on the need to lead with decarbonization, and the importance of speaking about decarbonization and carbon removal in the same breath, not as substitutes for each other. This workshop sharpened our thinking about relevant audiences and the means to reach them. In particular, it clarified that the relevant audiences for discussing carbon removal at this time are primarily “elite” audiences such as NGOs, academics, and policymakers. As a result, media coverage of carbon removal (and attempts to secure or shape media coverage) are less important at this time than we had initially imagined. However, while we recognize this change in approach, we want to continue to help journalists avoid problematic framings of carbon removal as either a “silver bullet” or a “false solution” through the creation of a journalists’ guide. Matthew Nisbet’s final report will be published this Fall.



Appendix I Meeting Participant List

Abel, David – Boston Globe
Ack, Brad – Ocean/Climate Restoration
Anderson, Angela – Union of Concerned Scientists
Doszhanova, Elina – Climate Action Network International
Flegal, Jane – Bernard and Anne Spitzer Charitable Trust
Gellerman, Bruce – WBUR Boston
Katz, Edith – Martha Schwartz Partners
Levin, Kelly– World Resources Institute
Lewis, Jonathan – Clean Air Task Force
Lutzke, Lauren – University of Michigan
Morrow, David – Institute for Carbon Removal Law and Policy
Morton, Oliver – The Economist
Nicholson, Simon – Institute for Carbon Removal Law and Policy (meeting facilitator)
Nisbet, Matthew – Northeastern University
Nolan, Connor – Stanford University
Olson, Eric – Brandeis University
Palmer, Lisa – SESYNC
Ronis, Emily – Institute for Carbon Removal Law and Policy
Sclarsic, Sarah – MIT Media Lab
Shrestha, Eriko – Swarthmore College
Stabinsky, Doreen – College of the Atlantic
Stephens, Jennie – Northeastern University
Straw, Annelise – Institute for Carbon Removal Law and Policy
Valdivia, Walter – George Mason University
Wilcox, Jennifer – Worcester Polytechnic Institute



Appendix II Meeting Agenda

Wednesday, September 18, 2019

8:00	BREAKFAST
9:00	OPENING REMARKS & INTRODUCTIONS
9:15-10:15	COMMUNICATING CARBON REMOVAL- A PRESENTATION ON A REPORT IN PROGRESS Matthew Nisbet, Northeastern University
10:15-10:30	COFFEE BREAK
10:30-12:00	AN OVERVIEW OF CARBON REMOVAL APPROACHES David Morrow, Institute for Carbon Removal Law and Policy Jennifer Wilcox, Worcester Polytechnic Institute Kelly Levin, World Resources Institute
12:00-1:00	LUNCH
1:00-2:30	COMMUNICATING CARBON REMOVAL - RESPONSES TO AND REFLECTIONS ON THE REPORT IN PREPARATION
2:30-2:45	SNACK & COFFEE BREAK
2:45-4:00	HOW TO WRITE ABOUT AND REPORT ON CARBON REMOVAL -- JOURNALIST PANEL Bruce Gellerman, WBUR Oliver Morton, The Economist Lisa Palmer, SESYNC David Abel, The Boston Globe
4:00-4:30	CLOSING REMARKS & REFLECTIONS
5:00-6:00	COCKTAIL RECEPTION AT UMASS CLUB
6:30 - 9:00	DINNER HELD AT CARRIE NATION, BOSTON 11 Beacon Street, Boston, MA - (across the street)



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Thursday, September 19, 2019

8:00	BREAKFAST
9:00	REVIEW OF DAY 1 & PREPARATION FOR DAY 2 Matthew Nisbet, Northeastern University Simon Nicholson, Institute for Carbon Removal Law and Policy
9:15-10:15	SMALL GROUP BREAKOUTS State of the Science State of the Politics State of Activism
10:15-10:30	SNACK & COFFEE BREAK
10:30-11:30	CONSTRUCTING A CARBON REMOVAL COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH AND ACTION AGENDA Facilitated by Matthew Nisbet, Northeastern University
11:30-12:00	CLOSING REMARKS AND NEXT STEPS



Appendix III Additional Resources

Institute for Carbon Removal Law and Policy's Website:
<https://www.american.edu/sis/centers/carbon-removal/>

Why Talk About Carbon Removal?: https://www.american.edu/sis/centers/carbon-removal/upload/CRBP001_why_talk_about_carbon_removal_ICRLP.pdf

Carbon Removal Technology Fact Sheets:
<https://www.american.edu/sis/centers/carbon-removal/fact-sheets.cfm>



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