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Obama's Power Plays

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WITH its announcement last week that global warming is a threat to public health, the Obama administration has made clear that it plans to cut greenhouse gases substantially. This week, the House Energy and Commerce Committee began its own effort to deal with warming, but Congress's path to legislation is long and uncertain. President Obama can get started without waiting for Congress by taking these three steps:

First, he can tighten the Department of Energy's efficiency standards for consumer appliances — everything from lamps to refrigerators to vending machines. During President Obama's first term, 20 of these standards are up for revision, and if properly improved, they could reduce carbon dioxide emissions by about 70 million tons annually by 2020.

Standards on lighting, for example, should be strengthened enough that manufacturers would be encouraged to produce more L.E.D. lamps, which use a small fraction of the electricity required by incandescent bulbs, and don't waste electricity by generating heat.

Second, the Obama administration can direct the United States Agency for International Development to ship simple solar-powered cooking stoves to villages in Africa and Asia to replace the omnipresent twig-and-dung-burning stoves that turn even the most remote settlements into major producers of black carbon — a fine soot that increases global warming. The solar stoves cost as little as \$20 each, and the United States Agency for International Development could distribute 100 million of them under already existing programs.

Third and most important, President Obama can slash emissions from power plants and cars. For power plants, this will mean demanding more efficiency and, in many places, switching from coal to natural gas. The Clean Air Act authorizes the president to order that the 100 new coal-fired power plants on the drawing board be built to operate with cleaner natural gas. He can also order existing coal plants to switch to high-efficiency natural gas technology — and thus cut their emissions by as much as two-thirds. As for cars, the administration can stand up to automakers by following California's example and requiring a 30 percent reduction in tailpipe emissions by 2016.

By taking these steps as soon as possible, President Obama can show the largest polluters — the auto industry and utility companies — that he is serious, and let scientists and engineers know that their work is urgent. Why wait for Congress?