

Keith Johnson writes:

President Barack Obama's administration is taking plenty of heat from environmentalists after opening the Arctic to oil drilling by Shell. But the administration's polar policy has a less noticed, if potentially very important, flip side: It's using its leadership of the Arctic Council to launch an offensive to curb emissions of short-lived climate pollutants that pose a particular threat to the melting ice at the top of the world.

Since Obama opened Alaska's Chukchi Sea to drilling this summer by Shell, greens have excoriated the environmental priorities of a U.S. president who says he wants to make the fight against climate change one of his legacies. Arctic oil and gas exploration, they say, poses not just local environmental dangers due to oil spills and the like, but exacerbates the use of fossil fuels that drive climate change in the first place. Obama even fended off angry questions about the topic Thursday during a Twitter chat on climate change.

But if climate change itself is helping to melt the ice and open the Arctic to drilling in the first place, Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry say they have a plan to cheaply and easily pluck low-hanging fruit and slow down the rate of warming in the far north. It involves an international effort to rein in emissions of "black carbon," or soot, as well as methane and other so-called short-lived pollutants that drive temperatures higher. While carbon dioxide gets most of the attention in the fight against climate change, black carbon and other short-lived pollutants account for more than 40 percent of global warming.

In recent years, climate scientists have increasingly begun to look at the immediate benefits of tackling black carbon and other short-lived pollutants, such as slowing the rate of rising sea levels or potentially avoiding catastrophic tipping points such as further Arctic melting. Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping made reductions in hydrofluorocarbons the centerpiece of their countries' cooperation on climate change in 2013, for example. Now, it has taken center stage at the top of the world.

At the start of the two-year U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council in late April, Kerry put the fight against black carbon front and center with an international agreement to curb emissions, especially in the Arctic. The council is an international club that includes the eight countries with Arctic territory and a dozen other observer countries with interests in the region, including China and India.

"The Arctic Council can do more on climate change, especially when it comes to black carbon emissions. Black carbon is up to 2,000 times more potent than carbon dioxide," Kerry said in late April in Iqaluit, Canada. Soot settling on snow and ice absorbs more light, accelerating Arctic warming. Greenland's ice and snow pack, for example, has gotten a lot darker in recent years, meaning it absorbs more light and heat.

"It doesn't take a Ph.D. to know that the combination of heat and ice produces melting," Kerry said. The Arctic Council is a good place to tackle the problem, Kerry said, since the melting is such an acute problem in the Arctic. Council members and observer states account for the bulk of global black-carbon pollution.

Environmentalists who are angered by the Shell decision applaud the focus on short-lived climate pollutants because it offers a way to bite off a chunk of the global emissions problem even before the world reaches an agreement on limiting carbon dioxide, the principal driver of climate change and global warming.

“If you can do that thoroughly, you can make a significant dent in the rate of warming, and that buys time,” Rafe Pomerance, a former State Department official who works with environmental advocacy organizations to fight climate change, told Foreign Policy.

By prodding into action the score of countries most responsible for black-carbon emissions, environmentalists hope the countries’ agreement could lead to tangible progress on forestalling temperature rise at a time of sinking global optimism about the realistic chances of limiting the impacts of climate change.

“If you do it now, you get not just the benefits of slowing warming in the Arctic, but you have a chance of actually bending down the temperature curve in the second part of the century,” Erika Rosenthal, a lawyer at environmental nonprofit Earthjustice, told FP.

Granted, just plucking the low-hanging fruit won’t be enough to stop global warming altogether. The world’s countries still must reach an agreement to limit carbon dioxide emissions, which is the main goal of the Paris climate summit this year. Indeed, recent research suggests that tackling black carbon and other short-lived pollutants without reducing carbon dioxide emissions will offer few long-term benefits. And cutting carbon will undoubtedly be a little tougher now that everybody has easier access to the massive deposits of oil and natural gas believed to lie underneath icy Arctic waters.

But the administration’s focus on curbing soot and other pollutants among the score of Arctic Council nations could more than compensate for its decision to open up Alaskan waters to Shell. The whole region is unduly sensitive to local black carbon and methane emissions that come from diesel burning in Europe as well as — you guessed it — oil and gas drilling north of the Arctic Circle, especially in Russia.

The Arctic Council’s new agreement is meant to drive reductions in soot from diesel engines and shipping and from excess methane burned off by oil and gas rigs. Shell, for example, agreed to limit emissions from engines on equipment and small craft, and to restrict the use of certain dirty fuels, in order to win environmental approval for its drilling plan. For black carbon in particular, the council’s new mission will build on years of cooperation between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Russia to rein in sooty emissions, as well as gradual steps by international maritime organizations to clean up shipboard engines.

Now that the once ice-locked Arctic is opening up more and more to the kinds of ships, rigs, and heavy equipment that Shell is taking up there, these kinds of little-noticed endeavors may be one key ingredient in keeping global warming in check.

“What we have is a leadership platform and a moment in time, and the moment arrives when the Arctic unraveling has become so clear as to be undeniable,” said Pomerance