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No sidelines in fight against climate change

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On April 22, 1970, 20 million Americans hit the streets to protest the environmental effects of more than 100 years of uncontrolled fossil-fueled industrial development. It was the first Earth Day.

What was intended to be a college campus teach-in soon spread to every community and city across the United States. It was and remains the single largest secular event in history. The sheer size of the protest — along with increasing visual evidence of dire health threats associated with air and toxic pollution — soon forced Congress to pass some of the world's toughest environmental laws, most of which include community right-to-know provisions and allow citizens to sue their government if it fails to enforce the law.

Citizens' rights have been enshrined in every major environmental law from that point on. These laws spawned others around the world — many more stringent than those in the U.S. — and most recognize the role of citizens in the enforcement of environmental laws.

Nearly 50 years later, Earth Day remains a day of reckoning, and now more than 1 billion people take action each year in almost every country on Earth. Some protest, many clean up their communities and plant trees, and millions more have their first exposure to environmentalism through educational programs at schools and universities. Governments large and small make commitments and meet with their constituents, while corporations make pledges to be more sustainable and responsible for the pollution they create.

It is fitting then that United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon chose Earth Day (April 22nd) for world leaders to sign the historic Paris climate agreement at U.N. headquarters in New York. At least 150 world leaders are expected to sign, making it the largest single signing of an international agreement in world history (another Earth Day first!). And it's happening not a moment too soon. On every front, global warming is becoming more

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Kathleen Rogers is president of Earth Day Network.



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