

We Finally Have a Climate Administration in the White House!

By Michael Sales
ECA Massachusetts Member
February 3, 2021

In horse racing, “Front running” is a term that describes a competitor who leads at the starting gate. As promised in the [ambitious plans](#) Biden laid out during his campaign, this appears to be the approach that the Biden team is taking toward the national and planetary climate crises that have been festering during four years of virtually complete inaction.

Many thanks and kudos to Dave Roberts of [Volts.wtf](#) for providing an overview of the new administration’s many ambitious plans that are being set in motion by executive action, legislative proposals and rhetorical commitments. This article presents a slightly edited version of the summary in Roberts’ January 29 *Volts* newsletter, with some additional commentary.

Executive orders

Biden immediately issued the following executive orders:

- The US will rejoin the Paris climate agreement.
- Federal agencies will review all new and proposed Trump regulatory changes passed in the waning days of his presidency, and specifically revisit fuel economy standards.
- The Keystone XL pipeline permit will be revoked.
- Oil and gas leasing in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge will be paused.
- The Office of Budget and Management (OMB) will “modernize and improve” the regulatory review process in order to “promote public health and safety, economic growth, social welfare, racial justice, environmental stewardship, human dignity, equity, and the interests of future generations.”

Foreign policy commitments

Biden is making it clear that climate change considerations will be at the center and integrated into the totality of America’s approach to its relationship with other countries:

- Massachusetts resident, [John Kerry](#), the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, will have a seat on the National Security Council and press for climate action across international engagements.
- In addition to rejoining Paris Climate Accord, the US will set out to substantially increase the ambition of the framework and begin crafting a new US “nationally defined contribution” (NDC) to the process.
- The US will host a Leaders’ Climate Summit on Earth Day, April 22, 2021, to underscore the administration’s new commitment.

- The Director of National Intelligence will prepare an estimate of the security implications of climate change. All agencies will develop strategies for integrating climate considerations into their international work.

A “Whole Government” Approach

- Former EPA Secretary [Gina McCarthy](#) (also a Massachusetts resident) will lead the new “White House Office of Domestic Climate Policy, as the first-ever National Climate Advisor.
- McCarthy will oversee the “National Climate Task Force, assembling leaders from across 21 federal agencies” to coordinate on climate policy.

Leverage government buying power and fossil-fuel footprint

- Agencies will follow Biden’s “Buy American” order, procuring domestic electricity and zero-emission vehicles, and “apply and strictly enforce the prevailing wage and benefit guidelines of the Davis Bacon and other acts and encourage Project Labor Agreements.”
- Each federal agency will develop a plan to assess and upgrade the resilience of its facilities.
- As part of his Buy American program, Biden has stated his intention replace the federal government’s entire fleet of gas-powered cars, trucks, vans, etc. (645,000 vehicles) with electric vehicles.
- The Secretary of Interior ([Deb Haaland](#) nominated) will pause oil and gas leasing on public lands and offshore waters “to the extent possible” for 60 days, launch a review of existing leases, and work to “double renewable energy production from offshore wind by 2030.”
- All federal agencies will be ordered to “eliminate fossil fuel subsidies as consistent with applicable law and identify new opportunities to spur innovation, commercialization, and deployment of clean energy technologies and infrastructure.”

Infrastructure

Ensures that every federal infrastructure investment reduces climate pollution and that permitting and siting of clean-energy projects on public land is accelerated.

Conservation, agriculture, and reforestation

- The US will conserve “at least 30 percent of our lands and oceans by 2030.”
- A Civilian Climate Corps Initiative will be created “to put a new generation of Americans to work conserving and restoring public lands and waters, increasing reforestation, increasing carbon sequestration in the agricultural sector, protecting biodiversity, improving access to recreation, and addressing the changing climate.”

- The Secretary of Agriculture (Thomas Vilsack nominated) will begin a process of stakeholder consultation aimed at spreading “climate-smart agricultural practices that produce verifiable carbon reductions and sequestrations.”

Energy communities

- Creates an “Interagency Working Group on Coal and Power Plant Communities and Economic Revitalization, to be co-chaired by the National Climate Advisor and the Director of the National Economic Council ([Brian Deese](#)),” which will coordinate cross-agency work to help “coal, oil and natural gas, and power plant communities.”
- The Working Group will advance projects that reduce local environmental harms from existing and abandoned fossil fuel infrastructure.
- The Working Group will explore efforts to revitalize brownfields and other degraded land.

Environmental justice

- All federal agencies will “develop programs, policies, and activities to address the disproportionate health, environmental, economic, and climate impacts on disadvantaged communities.”
- A “White House Environmental Justice Interagency Council and a White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council will prioritize environmental justice and ensure a whole-of-government approach to addressing current and historical environmental injustices.”
- Ensures that environmental justice enforcement is boosted at the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), Department of Justice, and Department of Health and Human Services.
- Creates a “government-wide Justice40 Initiative,” with the goal of directing 40 percent of the benefits of all relevant federal investments to disadvantaged communities, as tracked by a new “Environmental Justice Scorecard.”
- Creates a “Climate and Environmental Justice Screening Tool,” akin to the one EPA now uses, to identify disadvantaged communities and help direct aid in a uniform way across agencies.

Scientific integrity

- “Directs agencies to make evidence-based decisions guided by the best available science and data.”
- “Charges the Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy with the responsibility for ensuring scientific integrity across federal agencies.”
- All agencies involved with research will appoint a senior career appointee as Chief Science Officer to ensure scientific integrity.
- Reestablishes the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, co-chaired by the President’s Science Advisor (geneticist Eric Lander), to “advise the President on policy that affects science, technology,

and innovation” and otherwise provide policy-relevant scientific and technical information.

Front Runner Politics

Given the denial and overt hostility to science characterizing the last four years, it is not an overstatement to call Biden’s climate initiatives breathtaking. Bill McKibben called the first day of the Biden administration “the most remarkable day in the history of America’s official response to the climate crisis”, at least since that June afternoon in 1988, when NASA’s James Hansen told a congressional committee that the planet had begun to heat.”

Biden’s approach to the climate may also be extremely good politics. With only 51% in his column, Biden was elected by a thin majority of the popular vote. The Democrats control the House of Representatives by only ten votes, and Biden’s party is dependent upon the Vice-President for its majority in the Senate. Without some stunning successes in his first two years in office, the Biden climate agenda is likely to be tabled and defeated beginning in 2023.

Aware of the statistics and the press of time, the President and his administration seem to be committed to running hard and fast on the climate (and other matters) and never looking back. This strategy could mobilize millions of voters and potential voters in the 18–29-year-old demographic, where Biden scored big in 2020. Furthermore, the explicit focus on jobs and environmental justice could further cement the support of union families and racial minorities for Democratic standard bearers in the upcoming mid-term elections.

Front running is risky at the track and in politics. The front runner is the first to encounter obstacles, and the rest of the pack is eager to take advantage of mistakes.

That said, Secretariate never gave up the lead and maybe Biden won’t either.