

Media Mayhem: On his one year anniversary, Obama's green report card

D.C. enviro-leaders say the new president has made progress but needs to do more.

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A year ago, as President Obama prepared for his inauguration, environmentalists were optimistic.

For eight years previous, the most hostile administration to environmental concerns in the nation's history had flouted science and flogged nature. There was nowhere to go but up.

My brilliant (and more succinct) predecessor, [Peter Dykstra](#), pegged a column to the inauguration. He asked [five very experienced environmental operatives](#) for their take on the prospects of the incoming administration. "Together," Peter concluded, "they paint a fairly rosy

picture of the future of energy, environment, and climate change legislation in Barack Obama's Washington."

Perhaps, it's inevitable that such hope would be met with disappointment. Idealism often is replaced by pragmatism when politicians take office, and the battleship of state seldom takes a 180-degree turn in a year's time.

While some policy reversals (auto efficiency and the regulation of greenhouse gases, for example) were unequivocal, others changes (such as halfway steps on coal ash disposal and mountaintop removal mining) have been compromises between good science and greedy special interests.

On the biggest issue of all — climate change — we still haven't gotten past the all-talk, no-action stage. Media coverage of the environment has been fraught with rising doubts about climate science, poor reviews for the U.N.'s Copenhagen powwow and talk that the climate bill in Congress may not pass.

And yet — if our sampling offers any kind of hint — there's still a great degree of optimism among D.C.'s environmental leaders about the new administration.

I created my own mix from some of Peters' sources and a few new ones. Their take on Obama's first year in office? Lots of progress. But not enough progress. Below are their responses, in their own words:

Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and author of *Clean Energy Common Sense: An American Call to Action on Global Climate Change*:

President Obama's first year in office was marked by great challenges and great progress, including historic advancements from protecting resources and people's health to restoring our country's leadership in the international arena.

Most important — the president put clean energy development and climate protection at the top of his agenda and has been working hard with the exceptional environmental team he assembled to advance this vital work.



Among the achievements: the administration declared greenhouse gases a threat to public health; mandated that major facilities begin publicly report carbon emissions; and proposed the first-ever greenhouse gas and fuel efficiency standards for cars and light trucks.

Obama also worked with Congress to make more than \$50 billion available for renewable energy investments, which will create jobs and put our country on the path to a clean energy economy — improving energy security and national security at the same time.

Simultaneously, President Obama pushed to secure House approval of historic clean energy and climate legislation last June and is working to advance Senate backing of companion legislation this year.

While more work remains to be done to realize the president's vision of a prosperous, secure and sustainable future for our country and the world, Americans can be proud of the promising start.

Rick Hind, legislative director, Greenpeace:

The failure to reach an enforceable climate treaty in Copenhagen was tragic. The U.S. proposal to reduce greenhouse gases by only 3 percent by 2020 was a major contributor to this failure. The world's top scientists warn that we must [make reductions of 25-40 percent](#) to prevent the most catastrophic impacts of climate change.

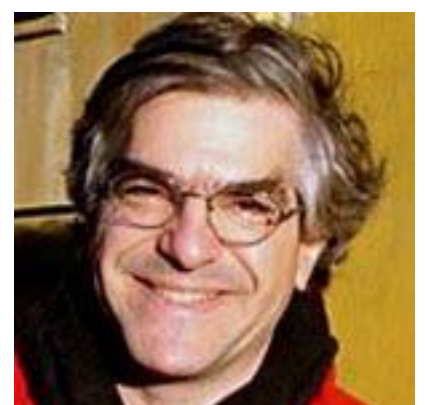


This failure contrasts starkly with Obama's leadership elsewhere starting with his appointment of Lisa Jackson at EPA, using the Clean Air Act to combat global warming, economic stimulus funding for green jobs and renewable energy, support of an overhaul of toxic chemical regulations and the prevention of chemical disasters due to terrorism and accidents.

Obama can still be the president who proved that we can hold back the gathering storm of climate change while also creating millions of green jobs and a stronger economy. It's too soon to give up hope, but it's not too soon to remind him that it's getting later than he thinks.

Daniel Becker, director, Safe Climate Campaign:

President Obama got off to a great start last spring when he ordered the biggest single step to curbing global warming — a 35.5 miles-per-gallon standard for cars, SUVs and other light trucks by 2016. His “green stimulus” provisions show that we can protect the environment while building jobs and the economy.



But much of the attention has focused on the weak climate legislation stalled

in Congress. In the wake of the distressing failure of the Copenhagen climate summit, Obama can seize the initiative and show his determination to act by exercising authority Congress has previously granted the president. He can use the Clean Air Act to clean up power-plant pollution. Converting just the 100 dirtiest plants from coal to cleaner natural gas would cut pollution from coal-fired facilities by 15 percent. He can set new aggressive efficiency standards for energy-hungry appliances from refrigerators to industrial motors. See [this recent article](#) I coauthored for more details.

Recognizing that Congress may not act and certainly won't be tough on climate pollution, the administration is examining these and other administrative steps. They should act boldly and soon.

Phyllis Cuttino, director, director of U.S. Global Warming Campaign, Pew Environment Group:

There was a great deal of optimism when President Obama was sworn in a year ago, and he started out strong. In his first 100 days, President Obama seized opportunities to regulate, invest and stimulate in order to reduce our dependence on foreign oil and seize market share in the global clean energy economy. The president seems to really understand that we can renew our manufacturing base, create new high paying jobs for Americans and protect our climate.



The biggest challenge is still ahead: Can he sign a strong climate policy into law in 2010? If we don't pass legislation that puts a price on carbon, we will continue to cede leadership in the global clean energy market to nations like China, Brazil and Germany. The question is, how much political capital will President Obama spend and how involved will he be in getting that strong climate policy?

What are your thoughts? How do you think Obama performed in his first year in office? Write your thoughts in the comments section below.

Journalist [Ken Edelstein](#) writes the [Media Mayhem](#) column for the Mother Nature Network. From various coffee shops in Atlanta, he publishes an environmental news site at [MyGreenATL.com](#).

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