

The Washington Post

Opinion: Biden can, and should, do more to protect the planet

Opinion by Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang
Feb. 1, 2021 at 9:00 a.m. EST

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President Biden is restarting the fight to protect the climate. He has directed the federal government to buy only electric vehicles for its future fleet. He has frozen new oil and gas leasing on public lands and waters. And he's pledging to restore the United States' role at the center of the fight against climate change — first, by returning to the [Paris climate agreement](#), and by committing to cut U.S. global-warming pollution to [zero by 2050](#).

He also elevated environmental justice policies to protect low-income and minority populations from the pollution that has long fouled their communities. Where [covid-19](#) and air pollution have collided, death rates have increased, [particularly among people of color](#), who disproportionately live in smog-bound communities.

Following four years of the Trump administration's near-total denial of global warming, we once again have a president who understands the urgency of doing something about the climate crisis.

But two important steps remain. The first involves transportation, which spews more pollution than any other sector. From wellhead to tailpipe, burning a gallon of gasoline pumps [25 pounds](#) of carbon dioxide, the primary global-warming pollutant, into the atmosphere.

The internal combustion engine's days are numbered. By 2028, electric cars will cost [no more to buy and operate](#) than those powered by gasoline. Other technologies aren't far behind.

Converting the government's auto fleet to all-electric vehicles is a good first step. The federal government owns roughly 645,000 cars and light trucks but there are more than 275 million vehicles on U.S. roads, nearly all burning gasoline.

The Trump years permitted governments and car manufacturers to backslide. After agreeing to new rules under President Barack Obama, five automakers — Ford, Honda, Volkswagen, BMW and Volvo — negotiated a deal with California [in 2019](#). It expanded loopholes and set emissions standards weaker than the auto companies had agreed to a decade earlier with Obama.

That Obama agreement had required a 5 percent [annual improvement](#) by automakers in emissions and gas mileage. To make up for lost time, Biden should set new rules that require a 7 percent improvement each year and phase out the sale of new gasoline-powered vehicles by 2030. This would be the biggest single step that any nation has taken to cut global-warming pollution.

The automakers will surely fight this. The companies are busy touting their new electric models without often mentioning they are producing only tiny numbers of them. On Thursday, for example, General Motors said it would aim to "[eliminate tailpipe emissions](#)" from its cars and light trucks by 2035. But because the company gave no year for actually ending its production of internal combustion engine vehicles, the announcement was little more than blue smoke and mirrors.

The other step involves fossil fuels. Power plants still burn shocking amounts of coal and fracked gas. Three-quarters of the roughly [240](#) coal-fired power plants still running in the United States already cost more to operate than building and running similar facilities fueled by the sun and wind. Coal has been on the way out [for decades](#), dropping from 52 percent of electricity generation in 1990 to 21 percent in 2019, replaced first by gas and now, increasingly, by non-polluting renewable sources.

That's not fast enough. Biden needs to set strong standards under the Clean Air Act, to ensure that all coal and gas are eliminated from the [electricity generation sector](#) in the next decade. Clean Air Act programs, which have successfully cleaned the air for 50 years, must be used to accelerate the needed clean-energy transition.

Biden campaigned on his superpower: legislative experience. But he faces a House and Senate in which half the members seem unconvinced that the Earth is round. Congress as currently constituted will never be able to lead on climate. So Biden will need to continue to use his executive powers to reverse the damage caused by Trump and begin to secure a safe climate.

The president has made a good start. But we must move boldly away from yesterday's polluted normal and work to keep today's climate crises from becoming tomorrow's catastrophes.

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