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'Drill baby drill': Trump takes aim at clean energy, climate change and the environment on day one

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By Tony Briscoe and Karen Kaplan
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On the day he took his oath of office, President Trump promised to sign numerous executive orders that stand to undercut California’s aggressive auto emission standards, undo Biden-era environmental protections and boost U.S. fossil fuel production. To raucous applause — first inside the Capitol Rotunda and inside the Capital One Arena afterward — Trump assured that his administration would “drill baby drill.”

Among other anticipated actions, Trump [nixed California’s statewide ban](#) on selling new cars that run solely on gasoline starting in 2035. The [“Advanced Clean Cars II”](#) rule requires an increasing percentage of passenger vehicles sold by California auto dealerships to be powered by zero-emission electric batteries or hydrogen fuel cells, with a small share of plug-in hybrids allowed. It is supposed to take full effect in a decade, though [the auto industry is not on track](#) to meet that ambitious goal.

“We will revoke the electric vehicle mandate, saving our auto industry and keeping my sacred pledge to our great American auto workers,” he said in the Capitol Rotunda. “In other words, you’ll be able to buy the car of your choice.”

Trump is an ardent promoter of the fossil fuel industry and outspoken climate change denier. Over the coming weeks, his executive actions have the potential to erase or significantly delay crucial portions of the Golden State’s environmental agenda.

The impact on California

California, the most environmentally minded state in the nation, already is facing dire challenges as a result of global warming.

The Los Angeles area is reeling from [the most destructive wildfires in American history](#), which have been burning for nearly two weeks and are not yet fully contained. These natural disasters, according to scientists, have become more difficult to manage as climate change has produced [bigger swings between extremely wet and extremely dry conditions](#). Much of the state is grappling with severe drought and water shortages. Rising seas and powerful storms are endangering the state's sprawling coastline.

"California has ambitious goals and huge risks, as have been highlighted [by the wildfires] the last couple weeks in Los Angeles," said [Cara Horowitz](#), executive director of the Emmett Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the UCLA School of Law. "It does not have a lot of time — nor do any of us — to tackle climate change. To the extent that the Trump administration and the fights that it provokes slow things down, that's not great for any of us. It's certainly not great for achieving California's ambitious climate goals."

Under the federal [Clean Air Act](#), California is the only state with the authority to establish vehicle emission standards more stringent than federal standards, due to the state's notoriously poor air quality. But the state must obtain federal approval from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency before the rules can be enforced.

The Advanced Clean Cars II rule was expected to prevent 1,287 premature deaths and provide \$13 billion in public health benefits over the coming decades, according to the American Lung Assn. In addition, 11 other states have adopted California's zero-emission regulation, meaning the rule would essentially be in effect for about 133 million people, or nearly 40% of the country's population.

That would change under Trump's executive order. Environmental organizations, however, vowed to file lawsuits to challenge the order.

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"With the fires in L.A. still smoldering, trying to take away California's clean car protections is cynical, cruel and illegal. Our kids and everyone with lungs will pay the price for these politically motivated rollbacks of protections for our air and the climate."

California already lags far behind its greenhouse reduction goals due in part to a lack of consistent cooperation from the Biden administration's Environmental Protection Agency, which did not approve several of the state's clean-air rules in the waning days of the lame-duck presidency.

Without federal approval, California officials shelved plans to enforce ambitious rules that would've [phased out fossil fuel-powered truck fleets](#) and locomotives for zero-emission alternatives.

“The honest truth is that we have not been on track for our own climate goals for 2030 for some time,” said [Danny Cullenward](#), a California-based climate economist and a senior fellow with the University of Pennsylvania’s Kleinman Center for Energy Policy. “And that was true when we had a productive working relationship with the federal government, which was taking ambitious steps to advance climate policy in many areas. Now the outlook for that is reversing. Not only will we not have that partnership, we’re going to have active hostility.”

The Biden administration, however, did provide billions of dollars for government agencies and industry in California to purchase zero-emission equipment through the Inflation Reduction Act. But Trump has signaled he wants to rescind this pool of funding. On Monday, he signed an executive order to in effect disband a Biden-created White House office dedicated to overseeing the distribution of Inflation Reduction Act funding. He also has [threatened to withhold disaster aid to California](#) if the state doesn’t agree to certain of his own policies.

“It’s frankly outrageous and un-American to talk about conditioning disaster aid,” Cullenward said. “Those kinds of games could be played with any part of how the federal budget interacts with programs and activities in California.”

National energy emergency

This action and others that Trump plans to take will be executed under the umbrella of another of his inauguration-day promises: to [declare a “national energy emergency”](#) that would give him more power to boost the production and use of fossil fuels.

A declaration of a national emergency would give the president expanded powers to set aside existing laws and take actions without needing input from Congress. Indeed, Trump declared a national emergency in 2019 to [take advantage of federal laws](#) that allowed him to expedite the building of a wall at the southern border.

The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University has [flagged 137 powers](#) a president may exercise when he determines that a national emergency is in effect. [One of them](#) would allow the president to tap into the [Strategic Petroleum Reserve](#) to increase the supply of crude oil. [Another](#) would give him the power to divert coal to an electric power plant.

A national emergency also allows governors to ask the president to [suspend enforcement](#) of the [Clean Air Act](#) designed to limit pollution from stationary sources such as refineries, factories and power plants.

Trump's executive order states that the U.S. needs more domestically produced crude oil, natural gas, coal and other energy resources — as well as more infrastructure to transport those resources around the country — to support “military preparedness” and protect itself against “hostile foreign actors.” Potential projects should not be slowed down by lengthy environmental reviews, the order adds.

Other executive orders [promote energy production](#) on public lands and offshore in federal waters, as well as in the the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and elsewhere [in Alaska](#). (Leases for offshore wind energy projects were revoked in [yet another executive order](#).)

Paris Agreement withdrawal

Trump — for the second time — also [signed an executive order](#) stating his intention to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord, [the landmark pact](#) among nearly 200 countries to cut planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

The 2016 agreement aimed to limit the increase in Earth's average global temperature to 1.5 degrees Celcius, or 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit, in an effort to avoid catastrophic effects from global warming. It requires countries to make specific commitments to reduce their emissions, which are ratcheted up every five years. Countries also are expected to invest in actions that will make themselves more resilient to the effects of climate change.

“Withdrawing the United States from the Paris Agreement is a travesty,” said [Rachel Cleetus](#), the policy director and lead economist for the Union of Concerned Scientists' climate and energy program. “Such a move is in clear defiance of scientific realities and shows an administration cruelly indifferent to the harsh climate change impacts that people in the United States and around the world are experiencing. Pulling out of the Paris Agreement is an abdication of responsibility and undermines the very global action that people at home and abroad desperately need.”

Although Trump was critical of it early in his first term, he was unable to initiate the yearlong process to formally withdraw until Nov. 4, 2019, the earliest date the treaty allowed. By the time the action was finalized, the effect was short-lived — President Biden rejoined the treaty on his first day in office in January 2021.

The clock for the second withdrawal will start ticking once the U.S. officially notifies the United Nations of its intent to do so. During that one-year period, the U.S. is expected to “fully participate” in the agreement, according to the U.N.

Climate activists urged Trump to reconsider his decision, which they said would put U.S. companies at a competitive disadvantage by favoring the fossil fuel industry at the expense of renewable alternatives.

“The rest of the world is shifting to clean energy,” Manish Bapna, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, said in a statement Monday. “This will slow that transition, not stop it.”

In his first term, Trump rolled back dozens of Obama-era environmental policies, including fuel economy standards and power plant emissions. He also revoked the federal waiver for California’s tailpipe emission standards (which were part of the state’s Advanced Clean Cars I act), which sparked a flurry of legal actions. Biden later reinstated the waiver, reaffirming the state’s ability to regulate vehicle emissions.

But when Trump scrapped many of the nation’s climate pledges, it was met with intense backlash. A coalition of states, cities and businesses began making their own climate commitments.

California was among them: Gov. Newsom signed climate agreements with leaders in China, while state regulators made deals with automakers to ensure regulatory clarity.

“Strangely enough, there was a way in which Trump abandoning climate leadership in his first administration, by doing things like pulling out of the Paris Agreement, opened up space for California to step into an even greater leadership role than it had had before,” said Horowitz, the UCLA environmental law director.

The same could be true of Trump’s second term.

“The Governor is 100% focused on the Los Angeles fires,” Newsom spokesperson Daniel Villasenor said. “Just like we did during the first term of the Trump Administration, California will continue to fight for clean air and water for all Californians.”

Times staff writer Russ Mitchell contributed to this report.

<https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2025-01-20/trump-day-one-environment-energy-climate-change>