

House Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
“Back In Action: Restoring Federal Climate Leadership”
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Introduction

Thank you, Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member Rodgers, Subcommittee Chairman Tonko, and Subcommittee Ranking Member McKinley, for inviting me to participate in this important discussion about the very exciting future of federal climate policy. I am looking forward to discussing the roles that the federal government can play in building a 100 percent clean future that addresses the climate, economic, racial justice and public health crises that our country is currently facing.

I do not need to tell everyone here about dire climate science predictions -- because now, our country is experiencing climate change firsthand. 2020 was [tied](#) with 2016 as the hottest year on record -- followed closely by the seven years before it. Last summer, we saw wildfires sweep the country, turning the skies in California an apocalyptic orange as the state suffered its [worst fire season](#) on record. Overall, there were 22 separate billion-dollar weather and climate disasters in 2020 -- also a new [record high](#). And it is economically disadvantaged communities and communities of color -- often those also most vulnerable to the effects of climate change -- that [typically](#) do not have the capacity or resources to adequately prepare for or recover from these extreme weather events.

Worse yet, all of these extreme weather events last year, fueled by climate change, hit during a devastating pandemic that has further laid bare the racial injustices in our society. Studies from last year showed that Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities were being hospitalized with COVID at [rates](#) four to six times higher than their white counterparts -- and these same communities tend to also live in regions with higher air pollution. The economic impacts of the pandemic are similarly unjust: as of June 2020, 24 percent of Black workers, 20 percent of Hispanic workers, and 19 percent of Asian workers [reported](#) being laid off or furloughed as a result of the pandemic compared to just 11 percent of white workers.

These statistics merely serve to illustrate the alarming intersection of the extraordinary crises of the global pandemic, economic recession, deep racial injustice, and a rapidly destabilizing climate. Congress and the Biden administration have a responsibility to confront these challenges.

All of these crises came to a head under a president who exacerbated their ill effects. Former President Donald Trump harmed Americans and deepened these intersecting crises by [worsening](#) air pollution during a respiratory pandemic, [providing](#) financial relief to fossil fuel companies and executives instead of Americans in need, [suppressing](#) clean energy industry development by preventing the creation of at

least 600,000 jobs, and much more -- generally moving the country backwards, stymying nearly all growth toward a much-needed just, clean future built on good-paying union jobs.

But now -- with the Trump administration over and former President Trump out of office -- the Biden administration has acted with lightning speed to reverse the damage, restore public health and environmental protections, and move the country quickly and ambitiously forward. None of these crises can be ignored, but we now have the political opportunity and the obligation to address them when we act on climate -- through both the executive and legislative branches.

The Benefits of Acting on Climate, Justice, and Jobs

For so long, climate action and climate policy have been focused on the costs -- the catastrophic extreme weather impacts from hurricanes, wildfires, and floods; disappearing coastlines from sea-level rise; the unjust and disparate impacts as frontline communities are hit from multiple directions by climate-fueled threats. These costs are real, and cannot and should not be ignored. But the moment we are in now requires that we consider more than the consequences of climate inaction. We must recognize that investing in climate action not only reduces emissions but is [critical](#) to economic recovery -- creating millions of good jobs, addressing historic environmental injustice, and setting the country up for a successful transition to a 100 percent clean future.

This is not a distant, esoteric policy dispute -- it is urgent and vital. The investments we need to make will directly and meaningfully improve people's lives.

Sustained climate investments will create good-paying, [high-quality, unionized jobs](#) here at home in the U.S. that all people can access -- especially people in underserved communities. The Biden administration has stated that its planned \$2 trillion investment program in infrastructure could create as many as [10 million](#) new good-paying jobs -- including for workers in industries displaced by the transition to a clean future, such as fossil fuel workers. To ensure that these new jobs are close to home for energy transition communities, investments could, for example, spur job training and creation to plug abandoned and orphaned oil and gas wells out West that account for significant methane emissions -- a greenhouse gas that is 84 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

Investing in climate action will also promote equity and help dismantle systemic racism and economic inequality. Low-income communities and communities of color have for too long suffered from a toxic legacy of unjust pollution in their neighborhoods. Support for programs such as the [Brownfields redevelopment program](#) and the Superfund clean-up program would cut pollution and improve public health while also creating jobs in the industries of the future.

Today's climate policy centers on the immediate benefits and returns -- both in terms of emissions and economic recovery -- that can come from large-scale public investment in clean energy. The introduction of legislation such as this committee's own [CLEAN Future Act](#) and [100% Clean Economy Act](#), complemented by last year's [House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis Report](#), have set the stage for swift and long-lasting climate action that matches the scale and scope of the challenges we face.

The priorities of President Biden and Vice President Harris reflect the known opportunities in robust climate action. They ran on bold climate change and environmental justice commitments, and they took office with that climate and justice mandate. The Biden-Harris \$2 trillion investment plan is the most [ambitious](#) climate plan of any presidential candidate in history. It underscores the administration's focus on resilient infrastructure and good job creation; and its dedication to directing 40 percent of all of these investment benefits to communities too long overburdened by a toxic legacy of pollution sets a new standard for equity and justice.

These investments in climate action as a tool for economic recovery -- for job creation, equity and justice -- and emissions reductions are not only functional, they are also popular. In an exit poll the day of the 2020 general election conducted by FOX News, [72 percent of respondents](#) said they were concerned about climate change, and [70 percent supported](#) increased government investments in green and renewable energy. Americans feel and understand the need for climate investment, and they want more of it.

Congressional Action

The ambitious climate commitments that the Biden administration has initiated through executive order in its first weeks in office, which this testimony discusses more at length below, are excellent. And as the administration's agencies get further into their review and rewriting of numerous Trump administration actions, there will be more opportunities for bold and lasting executive action. For example, the Biden administration could restore and reset ambitious clean vehicle standards in consultation with an automobile industry that increasingly realizes that electric vehicles are the future, or strengthen regulations to reduce criteria air pollutants and methane leaks from oil and gas wells. However, to fully address the current crises and achieve the much-needed and permanent clean energy future laid out by the Biden administration's opening actions, congressional action -- and most importantly, investment -- will be necessary.

With the interlocking crises of the global pandemic, economic recession, deep racial injustice, democratic backsliding and a rapidly destabilizing climate, few sessions of Congress have ever faced a greater responsibility to legislate. But similarly, few have faced such an enormous political opportunity to do good things on climate, justice, and jobs by investing in our nation's communities and infrastructure. That is why the first and most significant congressional action needed to tackle climate change -- while creating good jobs and addressing environmental injustice -- is the enactment of a major, long-term investment program following the American Rescue Plan to create good clean jobs, build the economy back to be more just and equitable, and set the country up for a successful transition to a 100 percent clean future, starting with 100 percent clean electricity by 2035.

In fact, immediate investments are necessary to stem our current economic crisis and keep pace with the structural transformation required of our energy systems, transportation networks, and land use patterns over the coming decade. The critical kinds of investments needed through congressional authorization range from a ten-year extension and expansion of clean electricity generation tax

incentives, to capital investment in new transit capacity, to the construction of affordable, climate-resilient housing, to decoupling state budgets from natural resource extraction by offering buyouts and a path to technologies that will develop and support a clean energy future -- and much more.

There is no silver bullet to solving climate change at this juncture. But similar to President Biden tasking the executive branch with an all-of-government approach to the crisis, Congress now has the opportunity to use every tool in its tool box to tackle climate and the economy -- including but not limited to a Clean Energy Standard, a [Clean Energy and Sustainability Accelerator](#) that targets 40 percent of investments to disadvantaged communities, the [Environmental Justice for All Act](#), and major investments such as through the [Diesel Emissions Reduction Act](#), the [Low Income Housing Energy Assistance Program](#), the [Weatherization Assistance Program](#), and the [Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program](#). This Committee has in the past put forward significant legislation, the CLEAN Future Act and the 100% Clean Economy Act, that offer reasoned and varied solutions to the climate crisis through a wide variety of tools and levers, including many of the ideas and programs mentioned above. It is this same whole-of-Congress approach put forth in the bills that will be needed to drive immediate economic and social recovery and justice while also meeting the scale of the current climate crisis.

Biden Administration Executive Action

The Biden administration has already helped to set an ambitious tone. On the administration's first day in office, it [issued](#) two significant climate change executive orders that reversed harmful Trump administration actions. First, President Biden rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement and put the U.S. back on the path to lead on global climate action. And he also began immediate review of dozens of critical protections and regulations that were rolled back or gutted under former President Trump. This was the Biden administration's opening salvo -- and it began the urgent process to address the Trump administration's harmful anti-environment and anti-public health actions.

However, climate change has accelerated over the last four years, and the level of action that is needed has also shifted -- both scientifically and politically. The Biden administration's next actions on climate, after just a week in office, reflected this changing consensus. The three executive orders [issued](#) by the Biden administration on January 27, 2021 take a whole-of-government approach to the climate crisis, delivering on campaign promises to address environmental injustice and create jobs through firm directions to agencies to use all of their available tools to tackle climate change.

These actions kick start the Biden campaign's promise to Build Back Better. They restore science-based policy-making, and further recommit the U.S. to international climate leadership. They protect 30 percent of U.S. lands, waters, and ocean by 2030. They pause the oil and gas leasing process on public lands, and require a review of outdated procedures that only line the pockets of oil companies. They start the process of creating ambitious domestic pollution reduction goals by mobilizing a whole-of-government approach, and chart a course to root out policies that disadvantage low-income communities and communities of color who bear the brunt of pollution impacts. And this is just an overview.

It is important to note that these executive actions on climate start us on a *process* towards achieving all of these commitments. Starting this process just a week into the administration is bold and unprecedented, and it is the exact level of ambition we need. With these orders, we now have a timeline for action, and we know the key dates moving forward -- such as the Climate Leaders Forum on April 22, and the process through which the U.S. will reconstruct its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement. After the previous administration's misleading statements that poorly masked their harmful actions, now, the American people will know what to expect. The executive orders tell us who is in charge of what, and just how seriously this administration takes the climate crisis and the fight to end environmental racism. The orders also begin to lay out how we, the public, can engage and participate meaningfully in shaping our own 100 percent clean future.

But the Biden administration did not stop there. It has also placed key people in important positions across the entire government at a scale we have never seen before. With former Secretary of State John Kerry as international Climate Envoy, and seasoned climate policy veteran and former Environmental Protection Agency administrator Gina McCarthy running the new White House Domestic Office of Climate Policy, the Biden administration has put in place strong, knowledgeable leaders to steer the new ship. And it goes much further than that -- the Biden administration has elevated climate and environmental justice throughout the White House and agencies, in places it has not been seen before. For example, there are new environmental justice offices at both the Housing and Human Services Department and, notably, the Department of Justice. And science is back -- the Biden administration has elevated climate scientists' roles and amplified their voices throughout agencies, and President Biden has made the Chair of the Office of Science and Technology Policy a Cabinet-level position.

As the former Managing Director of the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), it is hard to describe what a massive sea change this approach from the Biden administration is, not just from the Trump administration, but from my own time in government. While at CEQ, I was able to work with former President Obama to permanently protect more than a dozen national monuments of natural and cultural significance, including by working directly with involved stakeholders like sovereign Tribes; finalize guidance to ensure that federal agencies were required to account for greenhouse gas emissions in major project reviews; and co-chair the Council on Climate Preparedness and Resilience to protect our country against the worst impacts of climate change. As standalone environmental protection actions, these were significant.

However, the structure that would allow us to connect tackling climate change to each agency across government -- which is what needs to be done to meet the scale of the crisis -- just was not there yet. We were operating under a [Mid-Century Strategy](#) that sought to reduce U.S. emissions 80 percent below 2005 levels by 2050 -- something that we now know is not nearly enough. In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's [Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C](#) was released, which dictates that much faster and far more urgent action is needed on climate change if we are to avoid the worst effects. That Secretary Kerry will have a seat on the National Security Council as Climate Envoy; that former Mayor and now Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg has put climate front and

center in his vision for the Department of Transportation; and that a White House Domestic Office of Climate Policy even exists shows how seriously the Biden administration is taking the science, and the scale of opportunity. This whole-of-government approach will, in my experience, allow the levers of the federal government to be operated much more smoothly and effectively to tackle climate change while creating good jobs and addressing environmental injustice.

This Build Back Better plan is exactly about creating this future. The many processes kicked off in the first week of the Biden administration will put the U.S. on the path to cutting pollution, restoring environmental justice, confronting the nature crisis, trusting and integrating science, and investing in clean energy while centering American workers. This is where the jobs of the future are. The Biden administration has made its opening bid, and it has started high.

This is good news for ensuring that climate priorities remain a part of congressional economic recovery, climate action, infrastructure investment, and more.

Conclusion

It is time for Congress to seize the opportunity presented by the terrible intersection of these devastating crises and act boldly to create the 100 percent clean future we need -- one that supports family sustaining, good-paying jobs, cuts pollution in communities too long overburdened by it, and creates a just and equitable economy run on clean energy. Time is short, but the opportunity is enormous. Congress has the ability to make investments in environmental justice, economic development, and clean energy deployment, backed by extraordinary commitments to executive action. There is no time to waste. Congress must take the mantle and mandate handed to it by the American people and invest in the climate solutions of our future.