

February 2021

country report

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Office USA, Washington, D.C.



What's next for the United States?

Part 2: Climate Change and Energy Supply

By Sabine Murphy

How is the Biden administration changing the direction of the U.S.? The KAS Office USA takes a first look, in a series of five country reports. This report deals with climate and energy challenges. The White House website promises “swift action to tackle the climate emergency” and a “clean energy revolution”.

Key Policy Goals

The Biden-Harris administration doesn't make it a secret that the fight against climate change is on top of the to-do-list. Climate is prominently listed on the White House website as one of seven top policy priorities. It states: “President Biden will take swift action to tackle the climate emergency. The Biden administration will ensure we meet the demands of science, while empowering American workers and businesses to lead a clean energy revolution.”¹

The Biden administration takes a decidedly different approach to energy use and the impact of rising temperatures on the environment than its predecessor. After four years of the Trump administration denying scientific findings about climate change, Biden has pledged to follow science and involve the entire federal government in the fight against climate change. By creating inter-agency working groups and a **National Climate Task Force**, Biden wants to ensure that his policies for the production of **clean energy** and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, are not limited to single agencies but will be implemented throughout the federal government.

During his campaign, Biden promised to reach a **goal of net-zero emissions** across the economy before 2050, and to eliminate pollution caused by fossil fuel in electricity production by 2035.

President Biden wants to prioritize the issues of climate in **foreign policy** and national security. To reassert American leadership in working with other nations and across international fora towards a common goal of limiting greenhouse gas emissions and halting the rise of earth's temperature, he established a position of international climate envoy. The administration announced that it will host a **Climate Leaders Summit** on Earth Day, April 22 and will invite all major emitting nations.

Shortly after taking office, President Biden stated “We have a narrow moment to pursue action at home and abroad in order to avoid the most catastrophic impacts of that crisis and to seize the opportunity that tackling climate change presents. Domestic action must go hand in hand with United States international leadership, aimed at significantly enhancing global action.”²

First Steps and Announcements

Just a few hours after his inauguration, President Biden made good on his campaign promise and rejoined the

Paris Climate Agreement. His

predecessor had pulled out of the Paris Accords and heavily criticized the commitments made by the Obama-

Biden administration to limit greenhouse gas output. By using his executive power on the first day of his presidency and reentering the 2015 agreement, Biden set a clear signal that climate change will be a top priority for his administration. New targets for lower carbon dioxide emissions under the terms of the Paris Accords are set to be announced by Earth Day.

In the afternoon on January 20th, Biden issued an **Executive Order on Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis.**

It states Biden’s policy “to listen to science; to improve public health and protect our environment”³. He directs all executive departments and agencies to immediately start working on confronting the climate crisis and to review all actions of the Trump administration that conflict with the new national policies. The reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, access to clean air and water, and the improvement of public health are cemented as policy as well as the restoration and expansion of national monuments. This reverses Trump’s policies, who had opened up federal lands to energy exploration and rolled back the protection of some national monuments. Furthermore, Biden includes landmark policies to protect low-income and communities of color, who were historically disproportionately affected by exposure to chemicals and pesticides, and to hold polluters accountable. To achieve his policy goals, Biden pledges the creation of well-paying union jobs and environmental justice.

Biden also used his executive power to revoke Trump’s March 2019 permit for the **Keystone XL Pipeline**, a controversial project planned to run from the Canadian province Alberta through the U.S. states Montana, South Dakota and Nebraska and supplementing the existing Keystone Pipeline. Environmentalists had long criticized the pipeline for oil spills, a negative environmental impact on wildlife and the surrounding communities and the impact of burning the tar sands oil on earth’s temperature.

President Biden ordered a temporary moratorium on the implementation of the Trump administration’s Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program in the **Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.** He ordered a comprehensive analysis of potential environmental impacts.



“THE UNITED STATES AND THE
WORLD FACE A PROFOUND
CLIMATE CRISIS.”

Joe Biden, January 27, 2021

During his first week in office, President Biden issued his **Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad**. It is a sweeping decree creating the **National Climate Task Force**, headed by national climate advisor **Gina McCarthy**. The task force is meant to meet regularly to keep track of progress on the administration's goals. The task force consists of cabinet secretaries and acting heads of 21 federal agencies and reflects President Biden's promise to mobilize the entire federal government in the fight against climate change. The first meeting took place in early February. McCarthy said the meeting focused on job-creation and the agency's role in achieving the aggressive goals of reducing the United States' share of global emissions.

Biden wants to achieve the **elimination of fossil fuel emissions** from the electricity sector no later than 2035, by using the federal buying power. He ordered the alignment of management of federal lands, waters, real estate and financial programs with supporting climate action. To reduce carbon pollution, all federal, state and local government fleets will transition to **zero-emissions vehicles**. The renewable energy production on public lands and water will increase. Thirty percent of federal land and water will be reserved for conservation. The president ordered a pause of new oil and gas leases on public lands and waters.

The executive action calls for the Director of National Intelligence, **Avril Haines**, to coordinate a first-ever **National Intelligence Estimate** by the U.S. intelligence agencies on the national and economic security risks posed by climate change.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that it will not resurrect the Obama era **Clean Power Plan**, which is tied up in the court system. The CPP set climate pollution targets for each state's electricity sector, but gave officials flexibility how to achieve those goals by the end of the decade. The EPA plans to propose a new rule aimed at limiting greenhouse gas pollution from power plants but did not give any details on how it will replace the Clean Power Plan.

Organizational Changes and Important Players

Many of the new faces in the White House and agencies have years of government experience from the Obama or Clinton eras and know each other from advocacy roles and positions in non-profits and think tanks.

To advance their climate agenda, the Biden administration instituted two brand new science based positions, that did not exist before. To help with Biden's government wide approach to the climate crisis, he established the new **White House Office of Domestic Climate Policy** headed by **Gina McCarthy**.

In recognition that the climate crisis poses a threat to the United States' national security and the need for collaboration with other nations in the fight against global warming, Biden created the new position of **international climate envoy** for the former Secretary of State **John Kerry**, who will represent the Biden administration internationally.

White House

Special Presidential Envoy for Climate: John Kerry is a member of the **National Security Council** and represents the United States in global climate negotiations. He will have a

highly visible role in rebuilding a leadership position for the United States and negotiating with other nations and international fora like the G7 and G20. Kerry will be instrumental in organizing the Leaders' Climate Summit. He served as President Obama's secretary of state from 2013 to 2017 and was a lead negotiator of the 2015 Paris climate agreement. As U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, Kerry advocated for domestic climate policies. In 2019 Kerry was a key figure in the creation of World War Zero, an organization dedicated to fighting climate change. Kerry is a decorated Vietnam War veteran. No Senate confirmation is required.

Varun Sivaram is the **Senior Advisor to the Special Envoy for Climate**. Sivaram led the Global Energy Innovation Initiative at Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy. His research focused on clean energy innovation policy, energy transitions in emerging economies and digital technologies for decarbonation. He wrote a framework for policymakers to triple U.S. federal energy research and development. Sivaram was Chief Technology Officer of ReNew Power, a renewable-energy firm in India. Prior to that he held positions at the Council on Foreign Relations and the City of Los Angeles.

National Climate Advisor: Gina McCarthy was Obama's EPA administrator from 2013 to 2017. She leads the **Office of Domestic Climate Policy** within the Executive Office of the President, chairs the **National Climate Task Force** and coordinates climate policy across the entire federal government. Before her appointment to Biden's climate czar, she was head of a New York City based environmental advocacy group, the Natural Resources Defense Council. Under Obama, McCarthy's work was instrumental for his administration's Clean Power Plan, designed to limit greenhouse-gas emissions from power plants. The CPP was blocked in court and subsequently shelved by the Trump administration. This position doesn't need Senate confirmation.

Ali A. Zaidi serves as **Deputy National Climate Advisor**. Prior to joining the Biden administration, he was New York's deputy secretary for energy and environment. Before that, he served in the Obama administration as associate director for natural resources, energy and science at the Office of Management and Budget. Zaidi held an adjunct professorship at Stanford University and co-founded the advocacy group Lawyers for a Sustainable Economy. Zaidi's family immigrated from Pakistan when he was a child and he grew up in Pennsylvania, not far from Joe Biden's place of birth.

David J. Hayes is the **Special Assistant to the President for Climate Policy**. He was Deputy Secretary at the Department of the Interior in the Obama and Clinton administrations. Prior to working for Joe Biden, Hayes was executive director at New York University Law School's State Energy and Environmental Impact Center. The center supports state attorneys general in advocacy for clean energy and climate and environmental laws and policies.

Eric Lander is the designated **Presidential Science Advisor**. He is a geneticist, who co-chaired the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology in the Obama White House. Lander is joining the Biden administration from his leadership position at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, a top biomedical-research organization. Lander is a key player in the Human Genome Project. He is waiting for Senate confirmation.

Brenda Mallory is nominated as **Chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality**. Mallory is an environmental lawyer and served as director of regulatory policy at the Southern Environmental Law Institute. In her new position, she will oversee environmental

reviews for virtually all major infrastructure projects, including pipelines and highways. She will work closely with John Kerry and Gina McCarthy. Under President Obama, Mallory held positions in the EPA and the Council on Environmental Quality, the department she will run for President Biden. Mallory is waiting for Senate confirmation.

Brian Deese is Biden's top economic advisor in his role as **Assistant to the President for Economic Policy and Director**. He is a former Obama aide and worked the last four years as global head of sustainable investing at the Black Rock investment company. Deese worked with Biden on the bailout of the auto industry during the economic downturn in 2009. He was also a key player during the negotiations of the Paris Climate Agreement.

Environmental Protection Agency

EPA Administrator nominee Michael Regan is an alumnus of the Clinton and Bush administrations. He previously worked for nine years in the EPA's air-quality program and later for the Environmental Defense Fund, an advocacy group in New York City. His latest position was as leader of the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality. Regan is an advocate for environmental justice and founded the department's first environmental-justice advisory board. Under Trump, the EPA was weakened by administrators who actively worked against its mission to protect health and the environment. Regan will have to rebuild the agency and reinforce its regulations. He will be the first black man to lead the EPA. Regan is waiting for Senate confirmation.

Victoria Arroyo serves as **Associate Administrator for Policy**. Prior to joining EPA, she was the executive director of the Georgetown Climate Center, leading work on climate law and policy. Before that position, Arroyo worked at the Pew Center for Global Climate Change as VP for Policy Analysis. During the Obama administration, Arroyo worked as senior advisor in the Energy Department and as deputy assistant to the President for climate change.

Department of State

Jonathan Pershing is the **Special Envoy for Climate Change at the U.S. Department of State**. During the Obama administration, he held several positions in the Department of Energy, one of them as Senior Climate Advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Energy. Prior to that he was the Deputy Special Envoy for Climate Change and the lead negotiator representing the United States at meetings of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Pershing served as Head of the Environment Division at the International Energy Agency in Paris and published extensively on the topic of climate change.

Department of Energy

Secretary of Energy nominee: Jennifer Granholm has executive experience as two term governor of Michigan. Prior to that, she served as attorney-general in Michigan. Granholm was energy advisor to the former secretary of state Hillary Clinton when Clinton ran for president in 2016. Most recently, she was an adjunct law professor at the University of California, Berkeley. In 2009, Granholm worked closely with then VP Biden on a federal bailout plan for the auto industry in Michigan. The plan pushed the industry to invest in cleaner vehicles. Granholm is waiting for Senate confirmation.

References

¹ **White House Website** [WhiteHouse.gov https://www.whitehouse.gov/priorities/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/priorities/) accessed Feb. 15, 2021

² **Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad**, January 27, 2021, retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad>

³ **Executive Order on Protecting Public Health and Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis**, January 20, 2021, retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-protecting-public-health-and-environment-and-restoring-science-to-tackle-climate-crisis/>

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Sabine Murphy
Program Manager KAS Office USA
European and International Cooperation
www.kas.de/usa

Sabine.Murphy@kas.de



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