

Health & Science

# New Trump power plant plan would release hundreds of millions of tons of CO2 into the air

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President Trump plans this week to unveil a proposal that would empower states to establish emission standards for coal-fired power plants rather than speeding their retirement — a major overhaul of the Obama administration’s signature climate policy. The plan, which is projected to release at least 12 times the amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere compared with the Obama rule over the next decade, comes as scientists have warned that the world will experience increasingly dire climate effects absent a major cut in carbon emissions.

Trump plans to announce the measure as soon as Tuesday during a visit to West Virginia, according to two administration officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the White House was still finalizing details Friday.

The Environmental Protection Agency’s own impact analysis, which runs nearly 300 pages, projects that the proposal would make only slight cuts to overall emissions of pollutants — including

carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides — over the next decade. The Obama rule, by contrast, dwarfs those cuts by a factor of more than 12.

The new proposal, which will be subject to a 60-day comment period, could have enormous implications for dozens of aging coal-fired power plants across the country. The EPA estimates that the measure will affect more than 300 U.S. plants, providing companies with an incentive to keep coal plants in operation rather than replacing them with cleaner natural gas or renewable energy projects.

By 2030, according to administration officials, the proposal would cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from 2005 levels by between 0.7 percent and 1.5 percent, compared with a business-as-usual approach. Those reductions are equivalent to taking between 2.7 million and 5.3 million cars off the road.

By comparison, the Obama administration's [Clean Power Plan](#) would have reduced carbon dioxide emissions by about 19 percent during that same time frame. That is equivalent to taking 75 million cars out of circulation and preventing more than 365 million metric tons of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere.

Under the EPA's new plan, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides that help form smog would be cut between 1 percent and 2 percent by 2030 compared with 2005 levels. Under Obama, the agency projected its policy would reduce those pollutants by 24 percent and 22 percent, respectively, by the end of the next decade.

The EPA did not respond to a request for comment, and the White House said it was looking into the matter.

Since taking office, Trump has sought to roll back several major

climate regulations, proposing earlier this month to freeze tailpipe emissions standards for cars and light trucks, starting in 2020, for six years. He delivered on a key campaign promise more than a year ago when he announced that the United States would pull out of the 2015 Paris climate agreement, under which the country pledged to cut its overall carbon output between 26 percent and 28 percent by 2025 compared with 2005 levels.

As the world's second-largest emitter of greenhouse gas emissions, the United States has targeted the burning of fossil fuels that is driving climate change. The power sector ranks as the second-biggest contributor to the nation's overall greenhouse gas emissions, according to the EPA, accounting for 28.4 percent of the total in 2016. Transportation made up 28.5 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions that year.

Although the EPA projects that the U.S. power sector's overall carbon output will decline over time because of market pressures and other factors after the new rule takes effect, the policy shift would make it increasingly difficult for the United States to meet the international climate goals it adopted under the previous administration.

Joseph Goffman, executive director of Harvard Law School's Environmental Law Program and one of the architects of the Obama-era rule, said in a phone interview that the higher emissions that would result from the Trump proposal would damage the climate as well as public health.

"These numbers tell the story, that they really remain committed not to do anything to address greenhouse gas emissions," said Goffman, who served as associate assistant administrator for climate in the EPA's Office of Air and Radiation between 2009 and 2017. "They show not merely indifference to climate change but

really, opposition to doing anything about climate change.”

Elements of the proposed rule were first reported by the New York Times on Friday evening.

Utility companies, which had joined states in suing to block the Obama-era climate rule, would save annual compliance costs for the industry by about \$400 million a year.

Many utilities have moved to retire coal plants in recent years and switch to either natural gas or renewable power, which are more economically competitive. But the proposed rule, which focuses on improving their heat efficiency and would allow for upgrades without triggering the kinds of pollution controls currently required under federal law, could shift that dynamic.

Since the outset of the administration, officials have said they intended to replace the Clean Power Plan because the EPA exceeded its legal authority in crafting the policy. The rule, which has been stayed by the U.S. Supreme Court, established a program under which states could achieve emissions reductions by having utilities promote energy efficiency or build renewable power projects involving sources such as the sun or wind.

“We’re going back to the agency’s historical interpretation and application of its authority” under the Clean Air Act, one official said in an interview. “That is respectful of the boundaries established by Congress.”

Utility industry executives hailed the administration’s proposal as one that adheres to the law and would ease the financial crunch they would have faced under a more sweeping rule. Jim Matheson, chief executive of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, said in a statement Saturday that it appears the measure will “provide electric co-ops the certainty and flexibility

they need to meet their consumer-members' energy needs.”

“The Clean Power Plan would have resulted in stranded assets and stranded debt, significantly increasing electricity costs for many consumers,” added Matheson, whose association’s members get 41 percent of their energy from coal-fired generation.

The proposed rule, which does not yet have a name, has a 200-page preamble laying out the EPA’s reasoning for the sweeping changes.

Rather than identifying specific reduction targets and tasking state officials with devising plans to achieve them, it will define what constitutes the “best system of emission reduction” that utilities can undertake with technology that has been demonstrated to work. States will conduct a unit-by-unit analysis of plants in their state and will have three years to develop a plan to make their operations more efficient.

The EPA will have one year to determine whether to approve a state’s plan, and if it does not meet the agency’s guidelines, the EPA will have another year to impose a federal plan on the state.

As a result, it is difficult to determine exactly when the new measure will be entirely implemented. While the proposed rule analyzes its effects through 2035, officials said, it may not be fully in compliance until 2037.

Bracewell LLP partner Scott Segal, who represents utilities that run coal-fired plants, said in an email that the Trump administration has sought to empower the states as it curbs the excesses of its predecessor.

“The previous administration’s effort to address greenhouse gases was a complex and unnecessarily burdensome overreach that took much of the responsibility for power systems away from the state regulators, who know them best,” Segal said. “It is why 29 states

pushed back against the rules and the Supreme Court blocked their implementation with an unprecedented stay.”

Trump has repeatedly praised the U.S. coal industry, and his deputies have sought to enact an array of policies aimed at bolstering it. Those proposals range from relaxing rules for storing toxic waste from coal burning to ordering grid operators to buy power from coal-fired utilities.

The EPA’s analysis estimated that even under the new proposal, the power sector’s overall CO<sub>2</sub> emissions would decline between 33 percent and 34 percent compared with the 2005 tally by the time the rule is fully implemented.

Conrad Schneider, advocacy director for the environmental group Clean Air Task Force, said emissions may not drop as much as anticipated because of several policies the Trump administration has adopted to boost coal.

“This is the latest in the Trump administration’s effort to make coal great again,” Schneider said.

While the country’s greenhouse gas emissions continues to decline, scientists say the United States cannot meet the Obama administration’s Paris climate goal without policies such as the Clean Power Plan.

Carbon-dioxide emissions from energy use in the United States [declined by 0.5 percent last year](#), according to the International Energy Agency, because of an uptick in renewable energy and reduced overall energy demand. Globally, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the energy sector rose 1.4 percent, reaching a historic high after remaining flat for three years.

## Juliet Eilperin



Juliet Eilperin is The Washington Post's senior national affairs correspondent, covering how the new administration is transforming a range of U.S. policies and the federal government itself. She is the author of two books — one on sharks and another on Congress, not to be confused with each other — and has worked for The Post since 1998. **Follow** 

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