

Has Obama Kept Promises on Climate Since Last State of the Union?



PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY GUTIERREZ, AP

Large segments of pipe lie on Texas farmland in October 2012, ready to be buried as part of the Keystone XL. Environmentalists and the energy industry will be listening for mention of the controversial pipeline in President Obama's State of the Union address.

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In his State of the Union address a year ago, President Barack Obama promised that he would begin tackling climate change, whether or not Congress wanted to cooperate. (See related, "[Obama Pledges U.S. Action on Climate, With or Without Congress.](#)")

"If Congress won't act soon to protect future generations," he said in one of the most defiant lines of his speech, "I will." (See related, "[10 Ways Obama Could Fight Climate Change.](#)")

The centerpiece of Obama's promise was cutting back on carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels. But as he prepares to deliver another State of the Union speech on Tuesday night, environmentalists say Obama's pledges around climate change have come up short.

Eighteen groups, including Sierra Club, the Environmental Defense Fund, and Natural Resources Defense Council, [signed an open letter](#) last week urging the president to take bolder action.

They argue that Obama has pursued a policy that simply encourages all forms of energy production, expanding oil and natural gas drilling just as aggressively as he has promoted solar and wind power and electric cars.

"We believe that a climate impact lens should be applied to all decisions regarding new fossil fuel development, and urge that a 'carbon-reducing clean energy' strategy, rather than an 'all-of-the-above' strategy become the operative paradigm for your administration's energy decisions," the letter said. (See related story: "[California Tackles Climate Change, But Will Others Follow?](#)")

White House adviser John Podesta fired back [in a letter to the environmental groups](#) that he was "surprised" at their letter, given the effort President Obama is making in the face of significant congressional opposition. "President Obama understands that climate change poses a significant threat to our environment, to public health, and to our economy," Podesta said. "He believes it is imperative that we act to address these threats, and that doing so provides the United States and opportunity to lead in the development and deployment of clean energy technologies needed to reduce emissions." He said Obama "understands the need to consider a balanced approach to all forms of energy development, including oil and gas production."

The greens do give the president some credit.

"Kudos to President Obama for taking some necessary steps on climate change and energy, but we still have a lot to do," said Gene Karpinski, head of the League of Conservation Voters, who signed the letter.

But several crucial decisions—on whether or not to approve the Keystone XL pipeline from Canada to Texas, drilling in the Arctic, and hydraulic fracturing on public lands—will be pivotal in determining whether Obama's policy confronts climate change, or whether it worsens the carbon pollution problem.

As Obama delivers his State of the Union address, *National Geographic* takes stock of his progress on climate over the past year.

New Power Plants: High Hurdles

By far, the biggest step the administration has taken on climate change is setting strict rules limiting carbon emissions per unit of electricity produced for all new power plants constructed in the United States. (See related, "[New U.S. Limits on Power Plant Carbon Emissions: Five Points.](#)")

The limits are so low, in fact, that they essentially require new coal plants to be built with a technology that has yet to be deployed in the power industry: carbon capture and sequestration.

With construction almost complete in Mississippi on the first U.S. carbon capture coal plant, the Obama administration said "clean coal" technology is viable and should be standard.

Many industrial groups, pointing to cost overruns on the expensive Southern Company plant, disagree. Democratic Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, speaking for his home-state coal business, called the administration's approach "impossible."

Old Power Plants: Uncertainty

The rules on new power plants, which will face legal challenges, are the easy part. Few new coal plants are being built in the United States anyway, as utilities increasingly favor cheaper, cleaner, and newly abundant natural gas.

The more difficult issue is what to do about the nearly 600 existing U.S. coal plants, which provide about 40 percent of the nation's electricity.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) plans to unveil its plan for old fossil fuel plants in June, after more than a year of working on the issue with states, industry groups, and environmentalists.

Delivering on that will be very important for the president, said Ned Helme, president of the Washington, D.C.-based think tank, the Center on Clean Air Policy. Helme argues that Obama "can do it in a way that's very beneficial from an economic standpoint" by providing flexibility that is sensitive to regional differences across America.

The agency has hinted it will not require carbon capture, but that it may force many of the oldest generating stations to close down.

Obama might find that his effort to circumvent Congress puts him on a path to confront Capitol Hill anyway. Washington's big industrial lobbying groups are reportedly launching an effort later this week [to fight new CO2 rules](#), with an eye to introducing legislation that would block EPA action.

Energy Security Trust: Forgotten Amid Budget Woes?

One of the few energy specifics Obama floated in his 2013 State of the Union speech was the creation of an [Energy Security Trust](#), which over the next decade would steer \$2 billion in oil and natural gas royalties to [fund research](#) into biofuels, fuel cells, and advanced batteries.

The idea would require ever-elusive congressional approval. Two months after proposing the idea, Obama sought to paint it as a bipartisan compromise, nodding to Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, the ranking Republican on the Senate Energy Committee, who had suggested a similar funding structure for new research.

But the idea foundered, and it wasn't mentioned in a major Obama climate policy speech from last summer. (See related, "[Obama Unveils Climate Change Strategy: End of Line for U.S. Coal Power?](#)")

Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz said the administration was awaiting congressional action, but several key Republicans, including Murkowski and Republican Representative Doc Hastings of Washington, whose House committee oversees offshore drilling, say they [hadn't been contacted by the White House](#).

In a year fraught with tension over the federal budget and deficit reduction, the White House might have opted to forgo a battle over directed spending. As a result, though, many are left with the impression that the trust was more a political applause line than a solid proposal.

Federal Buildings and Fuel: Mixed Greening

Obama has said he wants the federal government—the nation's largest energy user—to set an example on energy efficiency and pollution reduction. (See related, "[Pictures: Seven Supergreen U.S. Government Buildings](#).")

His rhetoric in last year's State of the Union echoed that theme, which he sounded his first year in office by signing an executive order directing federal departments to save energy, thereby cutting costs. (See related story: "[Green Design Spree Aims to Trim U.S. Government's Big Energy Bill.](#)")

"It's a beautiful [goal] because he can do it all himself," said Helme. "It's a net positive with virtually no downside."

Indeed, the effort among government agencies [has had successes](#).

The General Services Administration, which manages most federal buildings, saved \$65 million in energy costs last year. Other agencies, including EPA and the Department of State, also have earned "green" labels (as opposed to "yellow" or "red," as scored by the White House Office of Management and Budget).

There were mixed results, however, for the largest energy consumer of all, the U.S. Department of Defense. The Pentagon does have more [LEED-certified](#) green buildings than any other department, but because of the sheer volume of its real estate—nearly 52,000 owned and leased buildings—[it fell short of the White House's sustainability goals](#), with less than one percent, 316 buildings, meeting the targets as of last year.

The U.S. military did reduce its petroleum fuel consumption 20.7 percent since 2005, and it has reduced the energy used per square foot of building space 17.7 percent since 2003 (falling short of its 21 percent target.)

Cutting Energy Waste: A Difficult Diet

It would seem that an easy target for cutting carbon emissions would be to reduce energy waste in the U.S. economy—everything from inefficient motors on factory assembly lines to lights turned on when no one is at home (or in the office.) In the United States, such waste is seen as one of the reasons that per-capita energy use is far higher than in other industrialized countries, including Japan and Germany.

Obama has vowed to [cut wasted energy by 50 percent](#), and to double "energy productivity," or economic output per unit of energy consumed. (See related "[Quiz: What You Don't Know About World Energy.](#)")

The president set out to achieve that goal through his proposed budget for the 2014 fiscal year, which began October 1. The administration's plan included federal aid and incentive programs that would have cut U.S. net oil imports in half by 2020.

"Those states with the best ideas to create jobs and lower energy bills by constructing more efficient buildings will receive federal support to help make that happen," Obama said in last year's State of the Union. That budget package, of course, never came to a vote in Congress, and the nation's energy diet was put off for another day.

Former White House adviser Heather Zichal, who is now an adviser to the Center for the New Energy Economy at Colorado State University, said last week that the White House is not thinking about any sort of energy waste program that would require legislation.

"The administration is focusing on existing authorities the president has, things he could already begin working on," Zichal said at a news conference to promote a package of proposals for advancing climate

action without help from Congress, including by using private third-party financing to spur clean energy growth.

The Keystone XL Pipeline: Unsure Route

Obama's delay in deciding whether to allow construction of the Keystone XL pipeline has had some advantages. As environmentalists and energy executives battle over the merits of the project, Obama has given neither side a clear win—or a clear motive to rally against him. (See related blog: "[Oil Flows on Keystone XL's Southern Leg, But Link to Canada Awaits Obama Administration.](#)")

But as the foot-dragging has continued, the decision's outsized impact on his climate and energy legacy has grown greater. (See related, "[Keystone XL Pipeline Marks New Battle Line in Oklahoma.](#)")

Designed to carry crude oil from Canadian tar sands to the refining centers of Texas, the pipeline would bisect North America, from Alberta to the Gulf of Mexico. (See related [Interactive: Mapping the Flow of Tar Sands Oil.](#))

Industry analysts say the project would bring jobs and help to keep energy prices down. Even if Obama halted the pipeline, Canada has signaled its interest in selling the same crude to China, which would require much more intensive transport and would still send the same emissions into the air.

Environmentalists argue that the U.S. president needs to take a stand against further development of tar sands oil, which is more carbon-intensive than conventional crude oil, and will put the world on what they call an unsustainable energy path. (See related: "[Scraping Bottom: The Canadian Oil Boom.](#)")

Greens were cheered by Obama's assurance [in his climate change speech last June](#) that his standard for approving the project was high.

"Our national interest will be served only if this project doesn't significantly exacerbate the problem of carbon pollution," Obama said. (See related: [Pictures: Animals That Blocked the Path of the Keystone XL.](#)")

"The way he framed it is great," said former EPA administrator Carol Browner. "The pipeline clearly flunks that test."

But others believe the White House will approve Keystone XL as part of a trade-off that includes other steps to curb the oil industry, perhaps including restrictions on drilling on federal lands.

A final decision on the Keystone XL is expected in the coming weeks. Observers believe that decision, more than any other, will determine the administration's path on climate change.

[Join @NatGeo journalists on Twitter](#) to discuss the State of the Union live beginning at 9 p.m. ET Tuesday.

This story is part of a [special series](#) that explores energy issues. For more, visit [The Great Energy Challenge](#).