



# Ten Ways to Take Immediate Executive Action on Energy and the Environment

By the Energy Opportunity Team

A new presidential administration will take office on January 20 with a unique opportunity to spur economic growth and create jobs by shifting to a low-carbon economy and reducing global warming emissions. President-elect Barack Obama showed support during his campaign for a series of bold initiatives to achieve these goals. He has endorsed a national Renewable Electricity Standard to generate 10 percent of the country's electricity from renewable sources by 2012 and 25 percent by 2025. He has also called for 15 and 80 percent reductions in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 and 2050, respectively, through a cap-and-trade program.

These measures are crucial to our transition to a clean energy economy, but many of them are legislative proposals that will take months or more to enact. A number of administrative actions could immediately reduce energy consumption, create jobs, and lower greenhouse gas emissions. Below are 10 policy options that the new administration could undertake right away through executive orders, White House actions, and agency decisions.

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## Executive orders

### Require the federal government to consider greenhouse gas emissions under the National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA, requires federal agencies to fully and publicly disclose the environmental effects of their actions. NEPA is intended to ensure that decision makers are armed with a complete understanding of the environmental implications associated with policy decisions. It also provides opportunities to restructure proposals in order to minimize their environmental effects while accomplishing their objectives. Yet the federal government lacks a systematic process for evaluating the consequences that federal actions have on greenhouse gas emissions or our vulnerability to changing climatic conditions. Failure to consider these consequences results in a critical information gap and undermines NEPA's basic objective.

The incoming administration can pass an executive order to clarify NEPA's authority to ensure that global warming is systematically considered during environmental assess-

ments of federal actions. The Center for American Progress outlined such an executive order in its May 2008 report, “[Full Disclosure](#).” Its immediate and appropriate use will contribute to a comprehensive climate change strategy. It will also ensure that federal actions do not inadvertently increase global warming pollution while businesses and citizens are required to reduce their emissions.

For more information, see “Full Disclosure” at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/05/full\\_disclosure.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/05/full_disclosure.html)

## Use government purchasing power to increase efficiency and renewable energy

The federal government is an enormous electricity consumer and owns a massive fleet of vehicles. The General Services Administration is the largest landlord in the United States, owning and operating approximately 500,000 buildings. The federal government’s management choices can play a major role in driving the market for more energy-efficient construction and operation practices. The federal government could also commit to purchasing a certain percentage of its electricity from renewable sources to help ramp up domestic renewable electricity generation.

President Bill Clinton issued an executive order that required agencies to reduce their petroleum consumption, setting a de facto fuel efficiency standard for the federal fleet. President George W. Bush repealed the executive order in favor of a measure of energy intensity, which correlates energy consumption to the gross domestic product and does not assure actual net reductions in energy use. The new administration should reinstate the executive order passed under President Clinton in order to fully deploy the federal government’s purchasing power and help spur markets for fuel-efficient vehicles and renewable electricity.

For more information, see “Capturing the Energy Opportunity” at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/11/energy\\_chapter.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/11/energy_chapter.html).

## Reinstate protection of the remaining national forest roadless areas

Our natural forests provide many benefits, including recreation, wildlife habitat, hunting, and water purification. Forests also sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and protecting the wild areas in our forests will help reduce global warming pollution. President Clinton protected nearly 60 million acres of roadless areas in our national forests—one of the largest land conservation efforts in American history. President Bush attempted to undo this effort by issuing rules to allow road building in previously untouched areas unless the U.S. Forest Service approved a petition from the state’s governor to prohibit it. Since then, different federal district courts have upheld and struck down the Bush rule, and it is still in legal limbo. The new administration should issue an executive order to reinstate the original roadless area protection program.

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## White House actions

### Launch a “green the White House” initiative

The White House is one of the most prominent buildings in America since it is the home of the first family. One relatively simple and visible way to communicate the benefits of clean energy to the public would be to “green the White House” by dramatically decreasing its energy use and employing renewable energy. A similar program under President Bill Clinton annually saved at least 2.7 million kilowatt hours of electricity, \$219,000 in 2008 dollars, and 1,639 metric tons of carbon dioxide. This greenhouse gas savings was equivalent to removing 273 medium-sized cars from the road.

The Bush administration said that it continued the program, but it has not issued any public reports about additional efforts and savings. This makes it difficult to assess the program’s progress since 2001. President Obama could expand the program and once again issue periodic reports to document the expansion of efficiency and renewables use, as well as energy and cost savings.

The next phase of this program would be to build on earlier efforts by utilizing the many new energy technologies developed since the Clinton administration ended in 2001, and the White House could even become a proving ground for new efficiency technologies. This would also demonstrate the cost savings from lower energy use and set an example for a lower carbon footprint. This is a great opportunity to educate Americans about the cost savings, lower energy demand, and shrunken greenhouse gas emissions from clean energy technologies.

### Mandate that auto companies boost super-efficient cars under the Auto Loan Program

The Bush administration finally agreed on December 19, 2008 to provide \$17.4 billion in bridge loans to General Motors and Chrysler to stave off bankruptcy. The companies must submit a complete restructuring plan by March 31, 2009 to remain eligible for additional assistance. The new administration could ensure that the next round of the bridge loan program for auto companies requires them to speed their efforts to produce super fuel-efficient cars. Loan recipients must also agree to cease all efforts to legally or legislatively challenge federal or state clean energy or global warming programs, including the California greenhouse gas standard for autos.

For more information, see “Top 10 Energy and Environment Priorities for the Obama Administration and 111th Congress” at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/12/environment\\_priorities.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/12/environment_priorities.html)

## Create an Energy Innovation Council

We must launch an unprecedented innovation effort to research, develop, and deploy clean energy technologies at commercial scale in order to meet the energy challenges of the coming decades. This will require collaboration across all federal agencies involved in energy research, including the Departments of Energy, Agriculture, Commerce, and Defense in addition to the Environmental Protection Agency and National Science Foundation.

Unlike previous innovation efforts led by the federal government, such as the Apollo Moon Project, the private sector must ultimately adopt the resulting technologies. This means that new technologies must be competitive in the marketplace. Large-scale demonstration projects are essential to build demand for these innovative clean energy technologies. The new administration could create an Energy Innovation Council to coordinate this effort and develop a multiyear National Energy RD&D Strategy to integrate federal programs. This strategy would also provide direct expenditures to support technology development and demonstration and indirect financial incentives or standards that promote new technology.

For more information, see “Capturing the Energy Opportunity” at [http://www.american-progress.org/issues/2007/11/energy\\_chapter.html](http://www.american-progress.org/issues/2007/11/energy_chapter.html).

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## Agencies and departments

### EPA could grant California the vehicle emissions waiver .

California is making aggressive strides to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, notably with the 2002 enactment of legislation to reduce global warming pollution from vehicles starting in model year 2009. California filed an application with the EPA to allow it to promulgate greenhouse gas standards for motor vehicles, which would reduce emissions from cars by 30 percent by 2016. Other states are allowed to adopt California’s standards and 16 others have done so. Together, these states make up 40 percent of the U.S. market for vehicles.

The EPA sat on the waiver request for two years, then denied it on December 19, 2007, despite a recommendation from its science and professional staff in favor of the waiver. President-elect Obama said during his campaign that he would grant the California waiver. Granting it would reduce emissions in California and these 16 other states, and boost efforts to develop and deploy the low-emission cars of the future.

For more information, see “Unprecedented Obstructionism” at [http://www.american-progress.org/issues/2007/11/california\\_emissions.html](http://www.american-progress.org/issues/2007/11/california_emissions.html)

## EPA could find that carbon dioxide endangers public health and welfare

The Clean Air Act authorizes the EPA to regulate “any air pollutant” that “may reasonably be anticipated to endanger public health or welfare.” Yet the Bush administration refused to make a clear declaration that carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases are air pollutants, which allowed it to do nothing about global warming.

The Supreme Court ruled in *Massachusetts v. EPA* in 2007 that the EPA has the authority and responsibility to treat carbon dioxide as a pollutant under the Clean Air Act. The court’s decision directed the EPA to determine whether carbon dioxide emissions “endanger” public health and welfare because of their contribution to global warming. The EPA could have begun reducing the country’s global warming emissions once it made this finding, yet EPA Administrator Steven Johnson refused to make it despite urgings from EPA scientists.

The new EPA administrator could help restore the integrity of the agency and take a crucial first stride on global warming by finding that carbon dioxide emissions endanger the public health and welfare of the American people as provided by the Supreme Court.

For more information, see “EPA Leadership” at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/03/epa\\_leadership.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/03/epa_leadership.html)

## EPA could lower mercury pollution from power plants

The National Research Council reported that prenatal and early childhood exposure to mercury can cause developmental delays and permanent brain damage in children. The EPA acknowledges that “coal-fired power plants are the largest remaining source of human-generated mercury emissions in the United States.” Nonetheless, the Bush administration proposed to delay mercury controls until 2018 and beyond. The federal courts struck this rule down because it did not adhere to the Clean Air Act. The *New York Times* reported that the EPA “ignored its legal obligation to require the strictest possible controls on the toxic metal.”

The EPA could adopt a program to significantly and promptly reduce mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants to protect the health and safety of our children.

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## HUD could create an Office of Sustainable Housing

Nearly 40 percent of U.S. carbon dioxide emissions comes from commercial and residential buildings. A national climate plan must aggressively address the operations and efficiency of our built environment in order to make a significant reduction in our greenhouse gas emissions.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development can play a central role in emissions reductions from residential buildings. HUD assists 4.75 million affordable housing rental units with direct operating subsidies and rental vouchers or by operating funding for public housing authorities. HUD could help make these units more energy efficient, which would in turn save money on energy bills and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The agency has existing programs that can quickly provide federal funding to up-and-running programs that make efficiency retrofits in existing homes and apartments. This would also expand workforce opportunities for green jobs. The HUD secretary could create an Office of Sustainable Housing to provide guidance within HUD and align national efforts on energy and climate with those on affordable housing.

For more information on the role HUD can play to incentivize and enable green, affordable housing, see “Green Affordable Housing” at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/12/green\\_housing\\_report.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/12/green_housing_report.html).