

Obama administration global warming regulation incorporates shift already underway

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On Monday, the Obama administration announced the draft of an environmental regulation that it claims will reduce carbon emissions from existing electricity production in the United States by 30 percent between 2005 and 2030.

The proposal, touted as a landmark environmental regulation bill is a ruse. It masks the fact that, without legislation, the current shift to gas power plants has already set the US on track to meet the 30 percent reduction. Additionally, the target ignores the greenhouse gases released by “fracking” natural gas, which is replacing coal, and falls far short of the immediate reductions in CO₂ emissions, across all sectors, needed to prevent catastrophic global warming levels.

The concrete proposal is a series of state-by-state CO₂ emission mandates, set out by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). States will be given the option to switch from coal to natural gas, to upgrade existing coal plants, to engage in carbon trading schemes with other states, invest in renewable energy, and improve energy efficiency.

States such as Washington, which only has one coal-fired plant and relies overwhelmingly on hydropower, will be given larger percentage reduction mandates. States like Kentucky and West Virginia, which rely almost exclusively on coal, will be given smaller targets. The EPA says the overall reduction in CO₂ emissions from US power production will be 30 percent.

The proposal, however, and much of its press coverage, hides the fact that the country is already more than halfway toward completing this target. Using 2005 as the starting year allows the Obama administration to

pose as taking serious action on greenhouse gases, when, in fact, this target would constitute a slowdown in the shift that is already occurring.

According to the EPA, between 2005 and 2012, carbon pollution from electricity production was reduced 16 percent. This reduction was the result of a shift to natural gas, away from coal, gains in energy efficiency, and the ongoing stagnation of the economy. Were this seven-year trend to continue, in 2030 carbon emissions from power plants would be at 57 percent of their 2000 levels, far above the proposal’s 30 percent.

The *National Journal* writes that the Obama administration’s decision to use 2005 as a baseline year for the change “is more in line with what power-plant operators asked for than what environmentalists demanded.” Frank O’Donnell, the president of Clean Air Watch, told the *Journal*, “It sounds like a riddle: When is 30 percent not really 30 percent? When it’s 30 percent of an inflated baseline.”

The change underway, that Obama is in essence simply consecrating, stems from the shift from coal to gas in the US power supply.

The shale boom has transformed the power generating landscape, favoring gas. In 2000, coal generated 52 percent of the nation’s electricity, but by 2012 the number had dropped to 37 percent. Meanwhile, gas nearly doubled its share, generating 16 percent of the nation’s electricity in 2000 and 30 percent in 2012.

A report by *Shrink That Footprint* finds that the fall in overall carbon emissions since 2005 is primarily because of the US natural gas boom and its effect on the energy market. According to the EPA, natural gas-powered plants emit 800-850 pounds of CO₂ per

megawatt-hour. Coal plants average 1,768 pounds per megawatt-hour.

However, a problem with these statistics is that they focus on the known carbon emissions from power plants, at the site of generation.

Much of the natural gas being used comes from the fracking boom in the US. (The gas is used almost exclusively for domestic purposes because the US does not possess sufficient export terminals to trade with other nations.) This fracking process releases methane, another greenhouse gas. Fracking also requires a tremendous amount of energy, which in turn releases greenhouse gases. Neither of these figures factor into the EPA's estimate of greenhouse gas production from gas versus coal power plants.

Coal companies, and their constituents, have reacted with hostility to the measure. The shift from coal powered generators to gas powered plants threatens the profits of coal companies. Gas has nearly doubled its share of the energy market while coal has lost more than a fourth of its share. Through this measure, Obama is supporting the power shift towards gas.

Legislators and governors in coal-centered states such as West Virginia, Kentucky and Oklahoma have expressed outrage, with many threatening to sue. While Republicans have led this charge, many Democrats have joined in.

Seeking to distance herself from Obama, Kentucky Democratic Senate nominee Alison Grimes poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into an advertising campaign in which she vows to "fiercely oppose anyone who works against Kentucky's coal industry."

Energy production in the United States accounts for 38 percent of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions. Transportation comes in second, at around 32 percent of the total emission.

According to the self-acknowledged optimistic estimates of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the entirety of global CO2 emissions would need to be reduced by 70 percent in 2050, relative to 2009 levels, to prevent catastrophic climate change.

Obama's tepid and spotty reduction of 30 percent, from 2005 to 2030, solely in the power sector, falls far short of the rational, organized, international effort needed to prevent catastrophic shifts to the climate and biosphere. The answer to global warming will not be

found within a social system in which the world is divided into competing nation states and all decisions are subordinated to private profit.



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