

Obama administration finalizes climate rules

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The Obama administration released Monday final rules governing climate pollution from the power sector, the nation's largest source of greenhouse gas emission. The rules, known as the Clean Power Plan, establish state-by-state goals for carbon emissions in 2030. Despite claiming to reduce greenhouse gases from power plants by 32 percent, the plan will do next to nothing to forestall climate change.

The Clean Power Plan was presented to the American public as a “sweeping” and “uncompromising” step by the president, bolstering his legacy and providing leadership in global efforts to address climate change. Obama himself described the plan as “the biggest, most important step we’ve ever taken to combat climate change.”

This “most important step” is in reality a fraudulent exercise to cover up the incapacity of the American political system to take any meaningful action to address climate change, despite record warming, rising sea levels, and increasingly extreme droughts, floods and storms. It reinforces a dependence upon fossil fuels at a time when a rapid transition to renewable energy is an objective necessity.

During the unveiling of the proposal and final plan, the Obama administration emphasized its “achievable” content, an outcome of unprecedented consultation with states, industry and environmental groups. States will be responsible for devising their own roadmap for meeting what are in fact flexible goals over a delayed time period between 2022 and 2030.

The supposedly sweeping character of the rule disintegrates upon close examination. The headline figure of a 32 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from the power sector is a thoroughly dishonest portrayal of the rule's impact. The reductions are calculated from a base year of 2005, in which power plant emissions neared peak levels. An honest accounting would use either the most recent data (2013)

or the international standard (1990) as the base year. Using the latter, the goal represents an extremely modest 12 percent reduction by 2030.

Even so, it is doubtful that the rule will have any consequential impact at all in achieving reductions in the sector. In the eight years between 2005 and 2013, annual power plant emissions declined by a total of 405 million tons. The goals set by the Clean Power Plan would require, in the space of 17 years, further reductions of just 475 million tons. In other words, greenhouse gas emissions from the power sector have declined at a rate nearly twice as fast without any rules in place.

This ongoing decline in carbon pollution from power plants is due to the transition from coal to natural gas as the primary fuel source for generating electricity. Roughly half of existing power plants built more than 30 years ago are coal-fired. Of those built in the past 10 years, coal accounts for less than ten percent. In April of 2015, electricity generation from natural gas surpassed that from coal for the first time.

This transition, far from being motivated by environmental or social concerns, is bound up with the prevalence of cheap natural gas and, in particular, gas extracted through environmentally destructive hydraulic fracturing techniques. Not only has the American fracking boom raised serious problems related to drinking water and air quality, but also called into question the climate benefit of the switch from coal to gas. Methane, the primary component of natural gas, is a potent warming pollutant, which, if leaked during the drilling process, can offset lower carbon dioxide emissions out of the smoke stacks of power plants. The Clean Power Plan makes no accounting of such pollution.

Renewable sources, on the other hand, are projected in 2030 to increase to just 28 percent of total generating capacity, according to the official analysis. Attaining

this wholly inadequate sum, however, relies upon provisions in the rule that are entirely voluntary. States have the option of expanding wind and solar generation or adopting energy efficiency programs to earn early compliance credits. They are under no obligation to do so. Other developments such as the transition from coal to natural gas or even efficiency improvements in coal burning plants may suffice.

The main objective of the Clean Power Plan is not a reduction in warming gases or large scale deployment of renewable energy, but rather certainty for the energy industry that electricity generation will remain tied to fossil fuels. It is a signal to Wall Street and the energy giants that their tremendous profits bound up with the extraction and use of natural gas are safe.

Obama has followed a similar path with the other element of his avowed climate legacy: carbon rules for the transportation sector, the second largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in the country. The rules for cars and trucks are limited to modest improvements in fuel efficiency, ensuring the profits of the oil and auto industries are not threatened.

Despite the feeble nature of the Clean Power Plan, it has provoked a furious reaction from leading Republicans and coal-state Democrats. Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, who previously called on states to boycott the plan, vowed to stop implementation through legislation. Industry groups along with 12 states took the unusual step of seeking a court injunction before the Environmental Protection Agency had even finalized the rule. Additional legal challenges are planned.

While there are some rival profit interests at stake, the driving factor behind the intense opposition to the plan is connected to a broader effort to completely dismantle environmental regulations. This is the position advocated by the Republican Party, while the Obama administration, as with the Democratic Party as a whole, offers nothing but a pretense of addressing environmental issues.



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