

# Obama orders stronger limits on power-plant emissions

White House's latest action on climate change will cut greenhouse-gas output from the US electricity sector.

- [Jeff Tollefson](#)

03 August 2015 Updated:

1. 03 August 2015

## Article tools

[Rights & Permissions](#)



Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis

Regulations to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from power plants face legal and political challenges.

US President Barack Obama released landmark regulations today (3 August) to curb greenhouse-gas emissions from the power sector over the next 15 years. The move could anchor his environmental legacy but is certain to provoke opposition and legal challenges from industry groups and some state governments.

The regulations, developed by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), call for a 32% reduction in emissions from electricity generation by 2030, compared to the 2005 level. That is a stricter target than the agency sought in a draft proposal released in June 2014, which laid out [a 30% reduction in emissions by 2030](#).

Speaking at a press conference, Obama called the regulations are “the single most important step America has ever taken in the fight against global climate change”. He added: “We can solve this thing, but we have to get going.”

The new plan assumes a greater reliance on renewable energy to help meet its tougher goal. But it also delays an initial 25% cut in emissions by two years, to 2022. Such changes are the product of a long and often-contentious review that generated 4.3 million public comments.

## State by state

Many experts say that the Obama administration could have set more aggressive goals to cut emissions. Still, environmentalists generally see the regulations as a significant step forward — and one that should [help the United States meet its pledge](#) to sharply reduce its greenhouse-gas output. The country will be a key player at a United Nations meeting in December, when nations will gather in Paris to negotiate a global agreement to fight climate change.

The new regulations send “a really strong and powerful signal in the run-up to the Paris talks,” says Will Gartshore, senior policy advisor for the environmental advocacy group WWF in Washington DC.

The power-plant regulations set emissions reduction targets for each state, based on a series of calculations about what is technically feasible. States must now develop their own plans and submit them to the EPA by 2016, although the agency says that states can request an extension of up to two years. The regulations also allow for interstate emissions trading, meaning a state that cannot meet its obligations could pay for emissions reductions elsewhere.

The EPA’s decision to delay the initial compliance date and revise the targets for some states came as no surprise, given complaints from many states and utility companies who argued that the proposal released last year was too aggressive.

That proposal would have required Arizona to reduce its emissions by 52% below the 2012 level in 2030. The EPA argued that Arizona could generate more electricity from natural-gas power plants that often sit idle. But the revised regulations would relax Arizona's target emissions rate in 2030 from 318.4 kilograms of carbon dioxide per megawatt hour, as proposed last year, to 467.6.

Dallas Burtraw, an expert on electricity regulation at the think tank Resources for Future in Washington DC, says that the revision makes sense, since Arizona's pipelines cannot deliver enough fuel to the power plants to reach the first target.

## A rocky path?

The core of the new regulations will not take effect until after Obama leaves office in January 2017. But the plan is expected to face significant legal and political opposition well before then. Republicans in Washington are considering legislation to block the regulations, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (Republican, Kentucky) has even urged states not to comply with the EPA rules.

But the bigger risk will come from the courts, with industry groups and several states expected to file legal challenges to the regulations. Although the [US Supreme Court ruled in 2007](#) that the EPA has the authority to regulate greenhouse-gas emissions, such regulations invariably face legal challenges on a range of technicalities.

Scott Segal, director of the Electric Reliability Coordinating Council in Washington DC, says that the regulations will force some companies to shutter coal-fired power plants because there is no economically viable way to reduce their emissions.

"Every other time they have sought to regulate the electric sector, there has at least been some indication of off-the-shelf technology that can be used to eliminate pollution," he says. "But in this case, the only off-the-shelf technology is to close the plant down."

Despite such complaints, Burtraw says that the vast majority of state environmental agencies are already preparing to comply with the regulations. The EPA has effectively pushed the conversation about climate policy out of Washington and into states, where politics are less divisive, he adds.

"It's something that is really engaging industry and people throughout the nation in serious conversations," Burtraw says, "and I think it's affecting the social consensus about what can be done."

Nature  
doi:10.1038/nature.2015.18030

# Climate change: Obama unveils Clean Power Plan

9 hours ago

**President Obama: "I believe there is such a thing as being too late"**

**US President Barack Obama has unveiled what he called "the biggest, most important step we have ever taken" in tackling climate change.**

The aim of the revised Clean Power Plan is to cut greenhouse gas emissions from US power stations by nearly a third within 15 years.

The measures will place significant emphasis on wind and solar power and other renewable energy sources.

However, opponents in the energy industry have vowed to fight the plan.

"I'm convinced no challenge provides a greater threat to the future of the planet," Mr Obama said. "There is such a thing as being too late."

Those opponents say Mr Obama has declared "a war on coal". Power plants fired by coal provide more than a third of the US electricity supply.

## **Breaking down the clean power plan**

The revised plan will aim to cut carbon emissions from the power sector by 32% by 2030, compared with 2005 levels.

"We are the first generation to feel the impacts of climate change, and the last generation to be able to do something about it," Mr Obama said. He likened the plan to taking 166 million cars off the road in terms of environmental impact. He called taking a stand against climate change a "moral obligation".

Mr Obama brushed off the notion that the plan is a "War on Coal" that will kill jobs

and said he is reinvesting in areas of the US known as "coal country".

"Scaremonging" tactics will not work to stop the proposal, he said.

"If we don't do it nobody will. America leads the way forward... that's what this plan is about. This is our moment to get something right and get something right for our kids," he said.



US power stations are the country's largest source of greenhouse gases

---

### Analysis - Matt McGrath, environment correspondent

The big question for the president is how to ensure that these carefully crafted rules don't end up in the recycling bin of history.

The White House believes that by vesting the power to implement these changes in the hands of individual states, they are pulling the rug from Republican claims that this is another Washington imposed, big government boondoggle.

The president is calculating that the courts will uphold the rights of the EPA to regulate carbon emissions under the Clean Air Act, as they have done on a number of occasions in recent years.

He is also gambling that because of the uncertainty of the courts and the long lead time until the regulations bite, many Republican governors will grasp the nettle and accept the changes.

The president sees this plan as the cornerstone of his attempt to secure a global treaty on climate change in Paris at the end of the year. But he needs that conference to succeed almost as much as the beleaguered UN process needs him.

Getting a deal in the French capital may help "save the world" from the worst ravages of climate change. It would also make it very difficult for his successor to unravel the Clean Power Plan.

---

Each US state will have an emission-cutting goal assigned to it and must submit a proposal to the Environmental Protection Agency on how it will meet the target.

The BBC's Tom Bateman in Washington says President Obama will hope that Monday's announcement secures his legacy on climate change.

The measures, our correspondent says, would give the president the moral

authority he needs to argue for global reductions in greenhouse gases at a major conference in Paris later this year.

However, several state governors are already saying they will simply ignore the plans.

In face of the criticism, the White House said the release of the plan was "the starting gun for an all-out climate push" by the president and his cabinet.

### Hillary Clinton vow

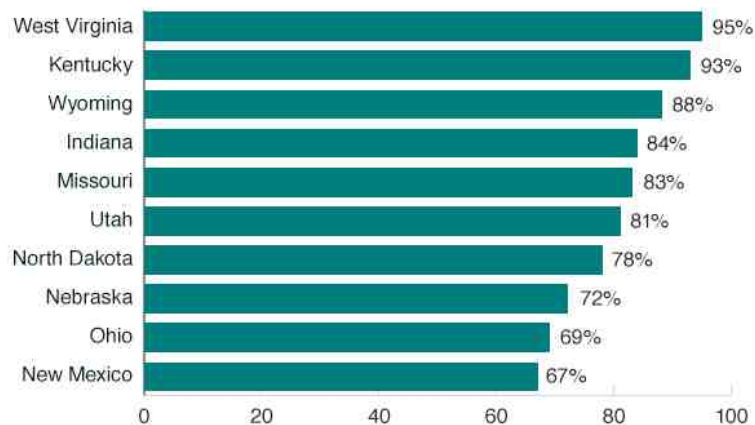
In a video released by the White House, Mr Obama said the new limits were backed up by decades of data showing that without action the world faced more extreme weather and escalating health problems.

"Climate change is not a problem for another generation. Not any more," Mr Obama said.

"My administration will release the final version of America's Clean Power Plan, the biggest, most important step we have ever taken to combat climate change."

#### Most coal dependent states

Percentage of electric power generated using coal

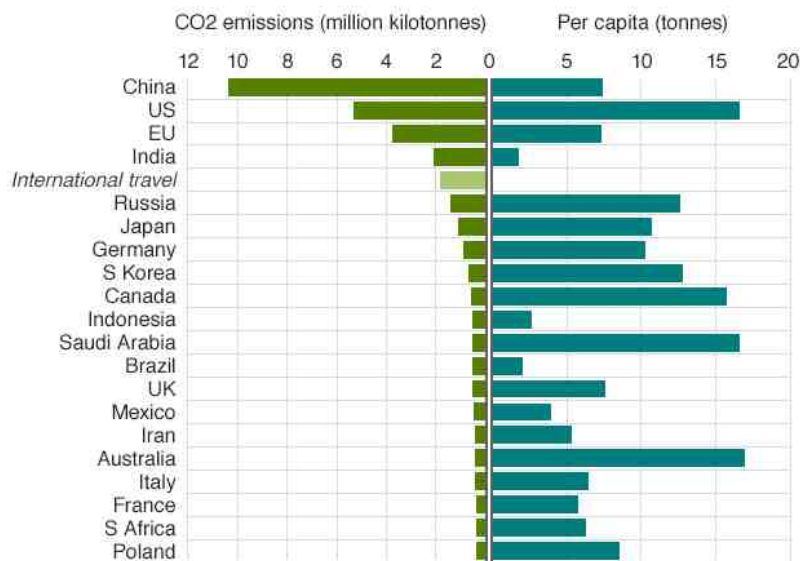


Note: Includes utilities, commercial and industrial generation

Source: Energy Information Administration



## Estimated 2013 emissions



Source: EDGAR database, EU commission & Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency

BBC

Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton said she would defend the plan if she was elected to replace Mr Obama.

"It will need defending. Because Republican doubters and defeatists - including every Republican candidate for president - won't offer any credible solution," she said.

"The truth is, they don't want one."

One Republican presidential candidate, Marco Rubio, said the plan would be "catastrophic," while another, former Florida governor Jeb Bush, said the plan was "irresponsible and over-reaching".

"The Supreme Court ruled, it's very clear that the EPA has the authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions, so regulation is inevitable and I think it's very irresponsible for the Republican leadership to go out there and say we don't have any solutions, this is all wrong, we don't believe in the science, so let's throw up our hands and do nothing," Heather Zichal, a former climate and energy adviser to the president and a key architect of the plan told the BBC's Matt McGrath.

"This will be an issue in the 2016 election and because the Democrats have a far more responsible policy position, it will allow them to prevail."

Correspondents say the emphasis on renewable energy sources marks a significant shift from the earlier version of the plan that sought to speed up a transition from coal-fired power to natural gas plants, which emit less carbon dioxide.

It is believed the revised plan will aim to keep the share of natural gas in US power generation at current levels.

Power stations are the largest source of greenhouse gases in the US and account for about one third of all such US emissions.

