

Expert discusses nation's environmental agenda under a Trump administration

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Trump, Stephens says, “has focused primarily on fossil fuels with plans to reduce regulations for shale gas extraction and advancing clean coal, but he has also mentioned ‘renewable energies and technologies of the future.’”. Credit: Northeastern University

Donald Trump has vowed to "rip up" the Paris climate agreement, repeal

the Clean Power Plan, and scrap NASA's Earth science research while reviving the coal industry, approving the Keystone XL pipeline, and expanding offshore oil drilling.

We asked Jennie Stephens, Dean's Professor of Sustainability Science and Policy at Northeastern's School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs, to weigh in on what the nation's environmental agenda might look like under Trump's leadership.

First and foremost, what is Trump's energy plan? Second, what are some of the biggest political hurdles facing the president-elect as he works to dismantle many of the policies put in place by the Obama administration to fight the effects of climate change?

On the campaign trail, Trump outlined his "America First Energy Plan" promising [energy independence](#) by getting "bureaucracy out of the way of innovation so we can pursue all forms of energy." He has made claims that accelerating extraction of fossil fuels will create millions of new high-paying jobs. He has focused primarily on fossil fuels with plans to reduce regulations for shale gas extraction and advancing clean coal, but he has also mentioned "renewable energies and technologies of the future."

If the president-elect really wants to prioritize energy independence and creating energy-related jobs, then advancing [renewable energy](#) is essential. Renewable energy offers so much potential because harnessing the perpetual and abundant energy from the wind, sun, and water offers benefits that can be distributed around the country. But it is not yet clear whether those connections are yet being made within the incoming administration.

Some of Obama's actions have been executive orders, so those can be easily changed with new executive orders. But other Obama administration policies and initiatives are more complicated and would involve complicated action to change.

The reality is that the world is gradually transitioning away from fossil fuels toward more renewable-based energy systems. If the new administration does not support that transition in the United States, our country will fall farther and farther behind and lose global competitiveness, but the rest of the world will continue. And cities and states throughout the country are not going to halt the rapidly accelerating deployment of renewable energy that brings so many benefits to communities throughout the country. The practical challenges of being a laggard rather than a leader on [climate change](#) at the international level will result in a whole host of political hurdles that could temporarily set us back in other areas too.

Trump will soon be the only world leader to deny the science of climate change, prompting many climate change experts to fear for the future safety of the environment. In your view, what might Trump's election mean for the future health of the environment?

Even before the election, it was often hard to maintain optimism about the future health of the environment. And now it is even more difficult because many environmental protections—that so many people and organizations have worked so hard to develop and implement over the past 50 years—appear to be at risk of being reversed or weakened. In my courses I encourage students to consider their own level of optimism versus pessimism with regard to environmental degradation and the

future. A critical point that I always emphasize is that it is often under duress, hardship, and negative situations that human resilience is demonstrated and our collective ingenuity is sparked. So despite a bleak outlook, it is an exciting time for creative and potentially radical social change.

Trump recently appointed noted climate change doubter Myron Ebell to lead his transition team for the Environmental Protection Agency, an indication that environmentalists could be, as one Time article put it, "forced to fight tooth and nail to protect existing checks on greenhouse emissions." Under a Trump administration, what steps might environmental groups take to further their mission to slow the effects of climate change?

For concerned citizens who want to get involved, here are six specific principles that we can advocate with the new administration and within our own communities: (1) make America a clean energy leader; (2) reduce carbon pollution and America's reliance on [fossil fuels](#); (3) enhance climate preparedness and resilience; (4) publicly acknowledge that climate change is a real, human-caused and urgent threat; (5) protect scientific integrity in policy-making; and (6) uphold America's commitment to the Paris climate agreement.

With the negative national-level landscape, grassroots local, city, state, and regional action is more important than ever. Actions of resistance to fossil fuel expansion, including the Standing Rock protests of the Dakota Access Pipeline and the fossil fuel divestment movement, are growing in numbers and significance. We are also seeing new coalitions emerge that are bringing together environmental activists, human rights activists,

social justice activists, Black Lives Matter activists, and others. New synergies and critical connections are being made that will empower change. Environmental issues in general and climate change in particular have historically often been too isolated from other issues, so I feel some optimism about how the new political landscape is resulting in new alliances and a broader recognition of interconnections among the many challenges currently facing humanity.

Provided by Northeastern University

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