

Report: Pandemic put U.S. on track to meet Paris climate goals

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The pandemic knocked the U.S. back on track to meet its targets in the Paris climate accord, and renewable energy saw a record-setting level of deployment in 2020 as coal consumption dwindled, figures from an

independent report released Thursday show, while transportation emissions are expected to jump as the country gets the virus under control.

COVID-19, the virus that has dominated economic, social and [political decisions](#) around the world for nearly a year, dominated the [energy](#), electricity and emissions landscapes last year too—taking a bite out of [greenhouse gas emissions](#) from the [power grid](#), curbing emissions from vehicles and witnessing the highest record of new [renewable energy](#) to come online in a year.

"We can't think of a crazier year than what happened in 2020," said Paul Camuti, executive vice president and chief technology and strategy officer of Trane Technologies, a manufacturing company.

The report compiled by research organization BloombergNEF and the Business Council for Sustainable Energy, an advocacy group, attaches data to those facts.

"We are just amazed by the changes that have occurred in such a short period of time," said Emily Duncan, director of federal government relations for National Grid, a natural gas and electricity utility, and a BCSE board member.

The figures arrive as the Biden administration is focusing on climate as an early priority and congressional Democrats are drafting a public works and infrastructure bill expected to contain low-carbon elements.

"Things were not looking great halfway through the year," said Ethan Zindler, head of Americas at BloombergNEF, adding that renewable energy sources got off to a "dire" first half of 2020.

Yet the U.S. set a record in 2020 for the most wind and [solar power](#) built

in a calendar year, thanks in part to federal tax incentives and guidance from the IRS in May that gave companies an extra year to complete their work and qualify for tax credits.

And the proportion of electricity generated from renewables including hydropower hit a record high of 20%, while coal dipped to just 19%, a trend likely to continue as the retirement of coal plants continues. "Coal plants that have retired are not coming back," Zindler said.

Greenhouse gas emissions "plummeted" in the U.S., the report authors found, down 9% from the previous year, 2019, and down 20% from 2005 levels. Emissions from transportation sources fell 40 percent below 2005 levels, placing the country on track to meet its obligations under the 2015 Paris climate agreement. Former President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the deal, a decision President Joe Biden moved to reverse on his first day in office.

"The sheer size of the accomplishment is pretty remarkable," said Zindler of the emissions reductions and renewables buildout.

Still, he said, cuts in transportation emissions, the No. 1 sector of emissions in the country, will likely not happen without government intervention.

"Transportation will not necessarily get there without new policies and regulations," he said, adding that he expects emissions from electricity generation and transportation will rise in 2021.

Emissions from electricity use, however, dropped 3.8% last year as people stayed home and changed their commuting patterns, leaving office spaces unused.

"At the office lights might not be on as much anymore, but they are at

home," Zindler said.

On the liquid fuel front, the Energy Information Administration, the data-churning wing of the Energy Department, forecast Wednesday the U.S. will import more petroleum than it will export in 2021 and 2022.

Low- and zero-carbon energy industries finished 2020 with the "fewest number of workers since 2015," according to the report, as 429,000 people, or 12 percent of those industries' workers, remained out of work at the end of the year.

Among the hardest hit have been energy efficiency workers who have to get access to homes or offices to install appliances and equipment such as heating and cooling systems, insulation or window panes.

"Those are jobs where people are going into peoples' homes," said Paula Glover, president of the nonpartisan Alliance to Save Energy.

The wind, utility-scale solar and battery storage industries all had banner years in 2020, said Heather Zichal, chief executive officer of the American Clean Power Association, a trade group created this year.

Zichal, who advised former President Barack Obama on climate and energy, predicted the majority of the power grid in the U.S. would be run by renewable energy by 2030. "This is going to be a clean power decade," she said.

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