



The Biden Administration Brings State Climate Leadership to the White House

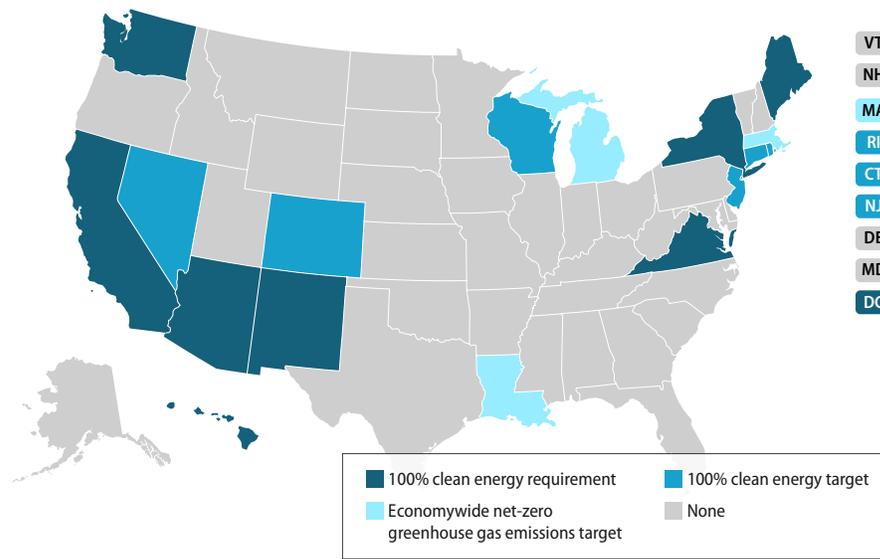
By Sam Ricketts, Christy Goldfuss, and Aimee Barnes | January 19, 2021

There are many reasons to be inspired by the nominees that President-elect Joe Biden has selected to lead his all-of-government mobilization against the climate crisis. The Cabinet is a diverse and incredibly accomplished group that looks like America. It is capable of fulfilling the mandate that Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris won decisively in November: to confront the climate crisis with a clean energy recovery that will create millions of good union jobs and build a just, equitable, and prosperous economy.

One of the most exciting things about this slate of “climate Cabinet” nominees is the experience and success in state-level climate leadership it will bring to the federal government. After all, for the past half-decade and longer, states have been laying a roadmap for bold, nationwide climate action.¹ Many of these nominees have served in or at the top of state government, including in Michigan, North Carolina, and New York. Others hail from states that have recently made great strides in clean energy such as New Mexico. All of them can now put lessons from their states’ leadership to work toward advancing federal policy and supporting ambitious climate action at all levels of government.

While the Trump administration flailed and failed in Washington, D.C., on everything from COVID-19 to climate to racial justice to job creation, states often led on these issues. With regard to climate, a number of states have accelerated their long-standing leadership and made meaningful progress while also lighting the path for future federal lawmakers to follow, through both executive and legislative action. Despite President Trump’s abandonment of the Paris Climate Agreement, 26 states and territories—representing a majority of the U.S. population—have remained committed to its goals through the bipartisan U.S. Climate Alliance.² Since 2015, 17 states as well as Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia have taken action on 100 percent clean energy agendas, according to a recent report from the Clean Energy States Alliance.³ (see Figure 1) Progress has occurred in blue, red, and purple states alike: In 25 key states tracked by the Energy Foundation, 2019 and 2020 saw 218 policy victories for clean energy in state legislatures and public utility commissions, compared with only 17 setbacks.⁴ This progress followed 2017, 2018, and 2019 state elections that saw numerous climate leaders elected to statewide office and state legislatures.

FIGURE 1
100 percent clean energy policies by state as of January 2021



Note: California has both a 100 percent clean energy requirement and an economywide greenhouse gas reduction program. Illinois and Minnesota are considering 100 percent clean energy legislation.

Source: Author's review of relevant state policies, updated from John Podesta and others, "State Fact Sheet: 100 Percent Clean Future" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2019/10/16/475863/state-fact-sheet-100-percent-clean-future/>.

States, along with local governments and tribal nations, have made important strides in everything from renewable energy deployment and conservation of public lands to environmental justice and support for high-quality clean energy jobs.⁵ According to an analysis for the U.S. Climate Alliance conducted by the Rhodium Group, 133,000 clean energy jobs were created in alliance states between 2016 and 2019, at a growth rate of nearly 7 percent,⁶ outpacing the national economywide job growth rate during the same period.⁷

Now, the lessons of climate leadership must travel from the state house to the White House—and the Biden-Harris administration's picks for its 'climate Cabinet,' are a good start. The new administration and Congress should learn from states' experience implementing transformative policies on the ground and should engage states' existing advocacy coalitions. Crucially, they should also pursue a policy and investment agenda that directly engages states and further empowers state and local governments to continue their climate leadership. For their part, the same advocates and lawmakers who have fought to make this progress happen across states now need to help guide the federal government. Thankfully, the Biden administration—with its slate of nominees for national climate adviser, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Department of Energy, U.S. Department of the Interior, and Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ)—is laying a strong foundation to take lessons learned in states to the federal level.

'Building Back Better' with lessons from states

The lessons of state-level climate action, along with lessons from cities, tribal nations, and environmental justice communities,⁸ have already informed the “Build Back Better” climate plan that Biden and Harris campaigned on to win the presidential election with more than 81 million votes.⁹ It is the most ambitious and comprehensive climate platform ever embraced by an American president. The climate plan includes commitments to new sectoral standards and strategies for agriculture, buildings, electricity, industry and transportation—including 100 percent carbon-free electricity by the year 2035—to lead in reaching net-zero greenhouse gas pollution throughout the U.S. economy by midcentury; calls for \$2 trillion in investments in clean energy and sustainable infrastructure and for at least 40 percent of those investments to benefit disadvantaged communities; and draws inspiration from a climate movement that has increasingly coalesced around a “standards, investments and justice” framework to confront the climate challenge in this new decade.¹⁰

To achieve this bold vision, Biden has said his administration will launch an unprecedented “all-of-government” effort.¹¹ Leading this bold agenda will be a slate of domestic Cabinet nominees with hard-earned experience from state-level fights.

Biden's 'climate Cabinet' nominees

Gina McCarthy, appointee for national climate adviser
Former EPA administrator and current president of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Rep. Deb Haaland (D-NM), interior secretary-designate
Congresswoman representing New Mexico's first congressional district and a member of the Laguna Pueblo. If confirmed, she will be the first Native American to serve in a presidential Cabinet.

Michael Regan, EPA administrator-designate
Current secretary of the North Carolina Department of Environmental Protection. If confirmed, he will be the first Black man to serve as EPA administrator.

Former Gov. Jennifer Granholm (D-MI), energy secretary-designate
Former governor and attorney general of the state of Michigan, and the first woman to hold each position.

Brenda Mallory, chair-designate of the White House CEQ
Former general counsel at CEQ and the EPA during the Obama-Biden administration. If confirmed, she will be the first Black woman to lead CEQ.

Ali Zaidi, deputy national climate adviser-appointee
Former Obama-Biden administration climate official, current New York state deputy secretary for energy and environment, and a Pakistani immigrant.

Other notable climate officials in the Biden-Harris administration: former Secretary of State John Kerry, special presidential envoy for climate change; Brian Deese, director of the National Economic Council; former South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, transportation secretary-designate; former Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen, treasury secretary-designate; former Gov. Tom Vilsack (D-IA), agriculture secretary-designate; Neera Tanden, Office of Management and Budget director-designate; Gov. Gina Raimondo (D-RI), commerce secretary-designate; Boston Mayor Marty Walsh (D), labor secretary-designate

Michael Regan, Biden's pick to lead the EPA, has served as secretary of the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (NCDEQ) for Gov. Roy Cooper (D-NC). He played an important leadership role on the North Carolina Clean Energy Plan, which is designed to slash greenhouse gas pollution from the electricity sector to 70 percent below 2005 levels by 2030, foster energy affordability, and accelerate clean energy innovation and economic opportunity.¹² Regan also established the state's first environmental justice and equity board, intended to "elevate the voices of the underserved and underrepresented" in his agency's work.¹³ These are key experiences, given the important role the EPA will play in the next administration's climate agenda—especially toward building a clean energy economy with equity and justice and setting the country on a path to 100 percent carbon-free power by 2035.¹⁴

Notably, in North Carolina, Regan and Gov. Cooper have been forced to pursue these efforts without much cooperation from the state legislature, whose Republican leadership continues to deny the clear science of climate change and do everything it can to obstruct the governor's agenda.¹⁵

Moreover, in December 2019, the NCDEQ under Regan reached an agreement with Duke Energy and community advocates that has resulted in the greatest coal ash cleanup in American history.¹⁶ This demonstrated experience is also important for the administrator-designate role, given that the Trump administration's EPA has eviscerated any semblance of environmental accountability for corporate polluters over the past four years.¹⁷

Former Michigan **Gov. Jennifer Granholm**, the nominee for energy secretary, is also uniquely suited to lead in a moment of both economic and climate crises. She served as the governor of Michigan, when the state and nation were last slammed with economic calamity during the Great Recession. Working with the Obama-Biden administration, Granholm championed recovery investments in clean energy jobs and helped to save the auto industry from collapse.¹⁸ She worked with a split legislature to establish Michigan's renewable portfolio standard and energy efficiency resource standard (EERS), net-metering program, and clean energy tax incentives.¹⁹ According to the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, the EERS has led to more than \$2.5 billion invested in clean energy measures and more than \$8 billion in cost savings for customers.²⁰ She also led the creation of Michigan Saves, one of the nation's first and most effective green banks financing job-creating clean energy solutions.²¹

Granholm's experience in Michigan should suit her well for the critical role that the U.S. Department of Energy will play in the Build Back Better agenda, especially in working closely with states. The tools available through the Energy Department include pursuing innovative financing for clean energy deployment through a newly reformed loan program office; setting standards that drive decarbonization in appliances and buildings; and aggressively deploying new powers that Congress has given the agency to commercialize clean tech innovations.²²

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Granholt's experience with the Michigan-centered U.S. auto industry could also prove critical to the success of Biden's agenda toward 100 percent clean, zero-emission vehicles.²³ On clean cars, too, states have been on the cutting edge: 13 states have signed up for California's more aggressive fuel economy standards, even as the Trump administration has targeted those regulations.²⁴ In late 2020, California announced plans to require 100 percent zero-emission new vehicle sales by 2035 and was followed quickly by New Jersey and Massachusetts.²⁵ More states are likely to take similar actions.

Gina McCarthy, before leading the EPA during the Obama-Biden administration, served as a state environmental regulator in Massachusetts and Connecticut for both Democratic and Republican governors. McCarthy has now been tapped to serve as the first national climate adviser, responsible for leading and orchestrating an all-of-government climate effort from the new White House Office of Domestic Climate Policy.²⁶

While in Connecticut, McCarthy led implementation of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative that has driven carbon reductions in the power sector and now has 11 member states in the Northeast and Middle Atlantic, with Pennsylvania expected to join soon.²⁷ During her time in Massachusetts, the state advanced a legal case against the federal government that culminated in the 2007 *Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency* Supreme Court decision, which empowered the EPA to regulate greenhouse gas pollution under the Clean Air Act.²⁸ During her time leading the EPA during the Obama administration, she drew on her state-level experience and will need to do so again from the White House in the new administration.

Ali Zaidi, who with McCarthy will lead Biden's climate agenda as deputy national climate adviser, has recently served as New York state's deputy secretary for energy and environment. In that role, he contributed to the state's considerable climate leadership. Earlier this year, New York announced the country's largest-ever renewable energy procurement, which incorporated prevailing wage requirements to ensure high-quality union jobs.²⁹ Zaidi has helped in implementing the state's Climate Leadership & Community Protection Act (CLCPA)—one of the most ambitious legislative efforts in the nation with deep and historic commitments to environmental justice.³⁰

Rep. Deb Haaland (D-NM), interior secretary-designate, is one of the first Native American women to hold office in Congress, where she represents New Mexico—a state that has undertaken a bold climate agenda. The New Mexico Energy Transition Act was signed into law in 2019, requiring utilities to reach 100 percent carbon-free energy and ensuring support for workers and coal communities experiencing the ongoing energy transition.³¹ New Mexico is also in the process of promulgating new regulations to limit methane pollution from oil and gas

operations, an important counter to the Trump administration's work unraveling federal rules.³² Given the Interior Department's vast authority over public lands and associated fossil fuel development, New Mexico's path-breaking work on just transition policies could provide important templates for the federal government. In addition, Rep. Haaland brings critical tribal policy experience to the Cabinet, both as an enrolled member of the Laguna Pueblo and from years of experience as a tribal administrator.³³ These experiences uniquely position her to center environmental justice in the agency's work and meaningfully engage tribal leaders and environmental justice advocates in policy development and implementation.

Brenda Mallory, in leading the White House CEQ as its new chair, will also no doubt seek to partner with and, where appropriate, borrow from state- and local-level policy actions. This is particularly the case with regard to community-driven leadership on environmental justice and the incorporation of climate change and equity into environmental decision-making under the National Environmental Policy Act. Since serving at CEQ under the Obama administration, Mallory has worked to advance climate and environmental justice across southern states at the Southern Environmental Law Center.³⁴ Under her leadership, CEQ could play a crucial role engaging with state and local governments, tribal nations, and communities around a shared vision and on-the-ground implementation of transformative action on climate and environmental justice.

Beyond the aforementioned domestic climate Cabinet nominees, there are many more opportunities for state and local climate leadership to shape Biden's climate agenda. In a whole-of-government effort, every agency has a role to play. The U.S. Department of Transportation, for example, which will be led by former Mayor Buttigieg, must be a leader in reducing carbon and local pollution from transportation—America's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions—from cars, trucks, aviation, and shipping.³⁵ Former Gov. Vilsack will reprise his role as agriculture secretary, to which he will again bring experience leading a state that has been on the cutting edge in renewable energy.³⁶ Gov. Raimondo, whose state is home to America's first commercial offshore wind energy project, has been picked to lead the U.S. Department of Commerce with oversight over marine conservation, advanced manufacturing, and local economic development.³⁷ Boston Mayor Walsh, the chair of Climate Mayors, was tapped to be labor secretary.³⁸ Biden will also install a state climate leader at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, who has challenged the Trump administration on more than 100 regulatory rollbacks, with most of the lawsuits regarding environmental protection.³⁹ Becerra also established a first-of-its-kind Bureau of Environmental Justice within the California Department of Justice.⁴⁰

From the state house to the White House: A roadmap for climate, jobs, and justice

Even before Biden and Harris and their team of appointees take office and begin to implement their agenda, the national conversation on climate policy solutions is already being informed by important breakthroughs at the state level.

In October 2019, CAP published its report, “A 100 Percent Clean Future,” offering a suite of federal climate policies to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas pollution by midcentury.⁴¹ This report borrowed from the considerable progress states have made on 100 percent clean energy agendas for climate, jobs, and justice.⁴² The report called for “learning from state and local successes, building strong coalitions, and putting the needs of workers and historically disadvantaged communities at the center of the process” in federal policymaking.⁴³ In April 2020, CAP published another paper arguing that with such progress, states are laying a roadmap for climate leadership.⁴⁴ (Disclosure: Two authors of this issue brief co-authored each of these reports, respectively.)

Gov. Jay Inslee’s (D-WA) presidential campaign released a climate policy plan in 2019, which has since been adapted into the Evergreen Action Plan. This plan derives from state and local government experience, including the central importance of sector-specific performance standards—such as those for 100 percent clean power, cars, and buildings—to drive decarbonization.⁴⁵ (Disclosure: One author of this issue brief also co-authored these plans.) Inspired by California’s CalEnviroScreen program and New York state’s CLCPA, Inslee’s plan also proposed a nationwide equity mapping initiative and was the first national plan to call for guaranteeing at least 40 percent of green federal investments for disadvantaged communities.⁴⁶ It is thanks in large part to Inslee’s state-informed plan that the Biden-Harris administration has zeroed in on 100 percent clean, carbon-free electricity by 2035—an aggressive and bold, but achievable, target.

In summer 2020, both the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis and the Senate Democrats’ Special Committee on the Climate Crisis published far-reaching reports that recognized the importance of state climate leadership and demonstrated a strong commitment to congressional action.⁴⁷ The House report, for example, said “state leadership has been critical in continuing the transition to clean energy and in demonstrating to the international community that a significant percentage of the U.S. population remains committed to climate action.”⁴⁸ It also emphasized that “state and local leaders need a strong federal partner to match their ambition with policies and initiatives that reward local innovation and leadership.”⁴⁹

Elsewhere in Congress, lawmakers have proposed numerous bills that reflect the leadership and the lessons from states and local actors, such as the Clean Future Act in the House and the Clean Economy Act in the Senate.⁵⁰ Several bills were introduced to implement a national 100 percent clean electricity standard—a require-

ment that has been enshrined in law in 10 states and territories, most recently in Arizona.⁵¹ A few bills also proposed the creation of a national clean energy accelerator, also known as a “green bank” or “climate bank,” to mobilize major investments in clean energy jobs and industries—much like the institutions that have been created in 14 states and local jurisdictions from Connecticut to Colorado.⁵² Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-OR) introduced legislation to provide expanded tax incentives for clean energy projects that meet certain high-road labor standards, which echoes Washington state’s Clean Energy Transformation Act.⁵³ The Climate Equity Act, proposed by Vice President-elect Harris in the Senate and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) in the House, also borrows from New York’s CLCPA, including a proposal for an equity screen on federal environmental regulations.⁵⁴

In addition, the end-of-year COVID-19 relief and omnibus spending legislation passed by Congress in December 2020 included a nationwide phaseout of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs)—a potent greenhouse gas that at least 16 states have already taken action to restrict.⁵⁵ Earlier this year, the U.S. Climate Alliance urged Congress to follow its lead on reducing HFCs, arguing that such action would not only help avoid the worst impacts of climate change but also “bring as many as 33,000 new manufacturing jobs to our states and communities and add approximately \$12.5 billion per year to the U.S. economy.”⁵⁶ Already, Congress has followed the transformative climate leadership of states with action that will support good, family-wage jobs to build America’s clean energy economy. And this is just the start.

Conclusion

The Biden-Harris administration is taking office at the beginning of a critical decade, one in which the scientific community has said the United States and the world must move rapidly to transform the economy and reduce the greenhouse gas pollution that is driving climate change.⁵⁷ In America, every level of government and every industry must accelerate its pace of action. The new Biden administration and Congress must act boldly, and in doing so, they should borrow from states' considerable leadership. While this issue brief has catalogued some significant progress to date, no state, city, county, or tribal nation has implemented a fully adequate agenda to stop climate change and environmental racism and support good jobs and economic justice. Nonetheless, they have made crucial progress. From the seeds of their progress can grow the green shoots of full, nationwide action on climate change and a clean energy economic recovery.

This month, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will take office with a team that is prepared for this essential mission.

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