

What's Cooking?

Climate Change, Legislation, and Growth



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What is always interesting to look for when a new administration takes office is a pointed shift in priorities. When Donald Trump was first elected, it was unclear how this shift would manifest itself, but it was certain that Obama's commitments to environmental sustainability and improvements in clean energy would fall by the wayside, supposedly in order to aid business growth in the oil and coal mining industries. With a president who denies the existence of climate change, conservatives dominating every branch of government, and an ever-increasing American obsession with growth and consumption, the environment is facing unprecedented challenges.

Under the Obama administration, the United States made strides towards becoming a global leader in sustainability and progressed towards energy independence. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act dedicated \$90 billion in funds towards clean energy investments, and the administration sponsored initiatives for increased access to solar energy in low-to-middle income communities. Obama also targeted carbon emissions by tightening efficiency standards for appliances and creating new regulations for carbon pollution from power plants.

In the fight for environmental protection, legislation is the greatest weapon. Since Theodore Roosevelt established the protection of National Parks, legislation has been used to conserve our natural resources. Unfortunately, as is now abundantly clear, legislation is a double-edged sword. Donald Trump's disregard for the well-being of the planet has made an impact less than a year into his term, most notably with his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords. He's also ramped up leasing for areas in the Gulf of Mexico for oil and natural gas drilling and fired a slew of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) scientists.

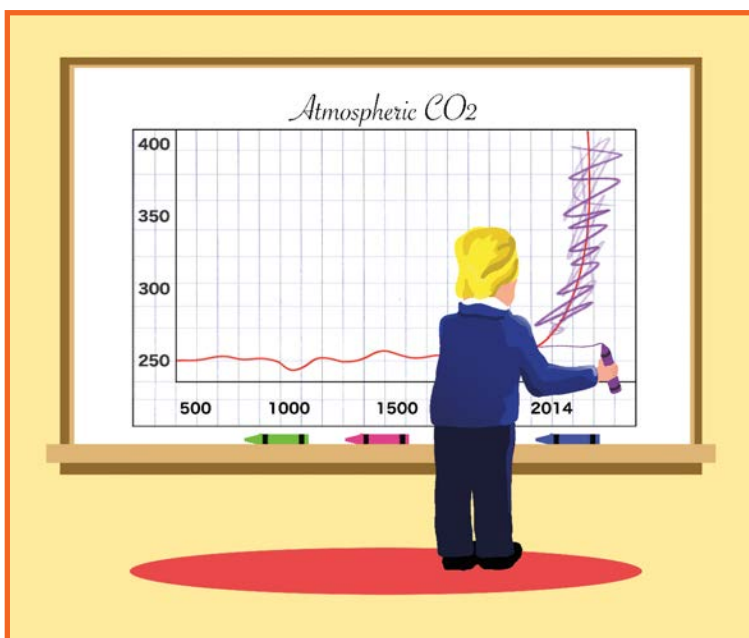
But the bulk of Trump's environmental destruction has been scrapping the work of his predecessor. The list of programs, committees, and regulations he's thrown out is already extremely lengthy. Some of his most abhorrent actions include the discontinuation of a study on the public health risks associated with mountaintop removal, the move toward a repeal of the Obama-era Clean Power Plan, scrapping the "Stream Protection Rule" allowing mining waste to end up in streams and rivers, and signing off on massive cutbacks in important protections for endangered species, such as whales and grouse.

We've started to see results, not just of Trump's legislative purge, but of a longstanding indifference to the way we treat the planet. A veritable flock of hurricanes has ripped through the Atlantic, ravaging Puerto Rico, Texas, and Florida. Donald Trump has completely ignored his responsibility to Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory, leaving the historically disadvantaged island to bear an unfair proportion of the brunt of climate change. In Texas, Hurricane Harvey caused \$200 billion in damages, even more than Katrina's \$160 billion. The wetlands that once existed around Houston would have absorbed a significant portion of flood water and saved millions of dollars had they not been paved over to make way for urban sprawl.

When looking at environmental legislation, it's important to examine trends that might impact public opinion on the environment. Has there been an increase in natural disasters? Have gas prices fluctuated irregularly? Are we suddenly able to light our drinking water on fire? These kinds of things, one would hope, draw the attention of the public

away from the multitude of other concerns we all have, and encourage some momentary foresight into the future of the planet.

But the election of a president who consistently rejects the overwhelming consensus by the scientific community on climate change is indicative of a serious lack of foresight on the part of the American people. It's not a blind spot either; according to the *Yale Program on Climate Change Communication*, 70% of adults in the United States



believe global warming exists. But the same study also concluded that only 40% of American adults believe that global warming will harm them personally, which is where problems begin to arise.

With a process as gradual as climate change, it's hard for any individual to perceive an immediate risk. Of course, with millions of citizens living in poverty, it's even harder to get people worked up about icebergs melting halfway across the globe. People are struggling to put food on the table, so of course the issues of employment and social welfare will generate much more collective American angst than climate change. It's easy to place the blame for global warming on the apathy of citizens and corporate greed. But while these factors, and a plethora of others, are undoubtedly responsible in one way or another, at the root of the problem is an actively unhealthy and unsustainable mindset.

Since the industrial revolution, we Americans have become increasingly fixated on growth. On the individual level we are obsessed with consumption, which fuels rampant corporate expansion, driving up production of more and more stuff, which will inevitably feed back into the vicious cycle. We assume that potential for growth is infinite, and that we can continue to externalize the consequences of our material lust forever. But if we don't try to rid ourselves of this dangerous mindset soon, the comfort of denial will become insufficient. We need to face the reality that the lives we've grown used to are unsustainable, and we need to do it now. ●