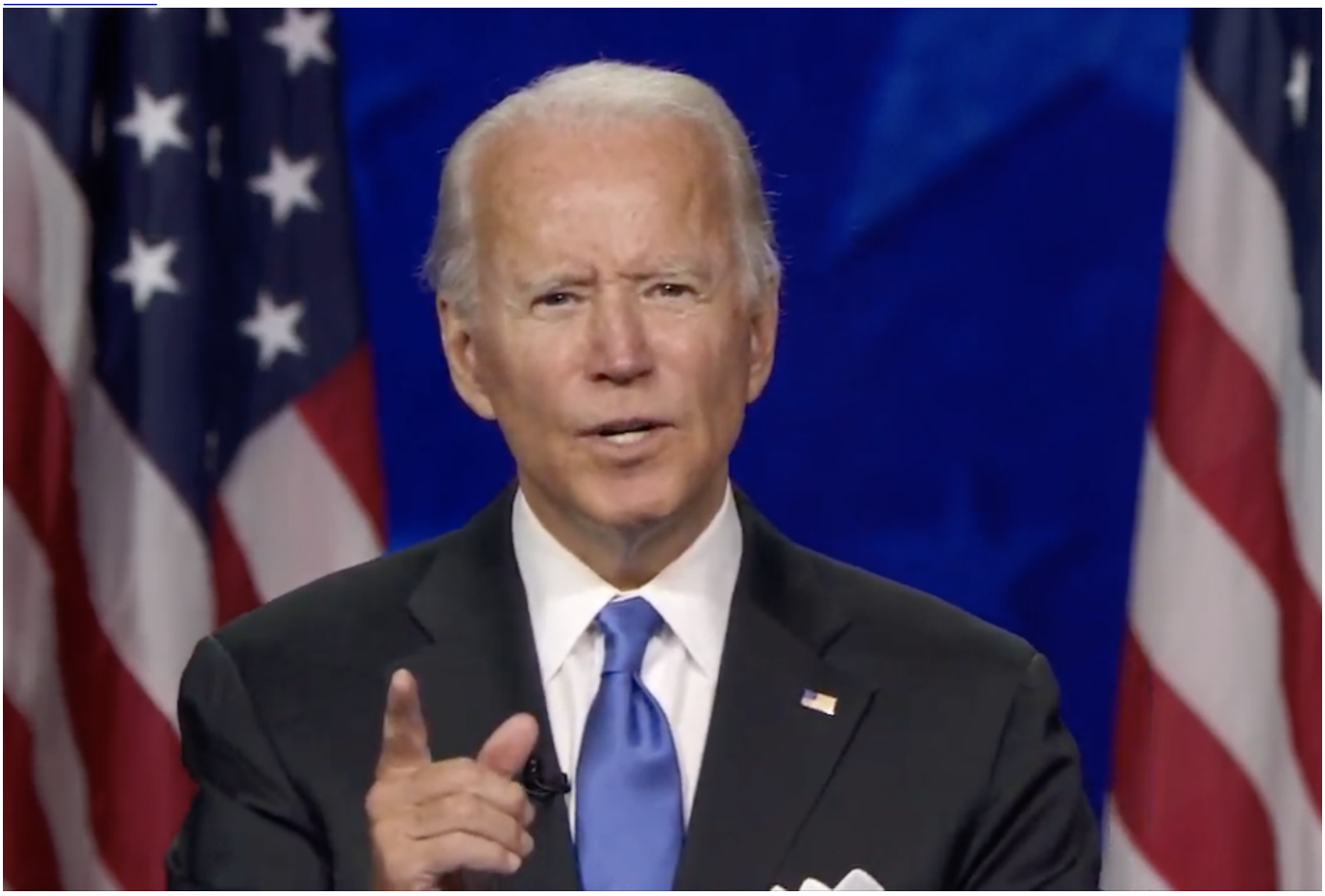
News
EarthBeat



Joseph R. Biden speaks at the close of the 48th Democratic National Convention to accept the nomination for president of the United States, Aug. 20. (NCR screenshot/Democratic National Convention)



by Brian Roewe

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When Michelle Obama urged Americans at the Democratic National Convention Aug. 17 to vote for Joe Biden "like our lives depend on it," her words carried special meaning among the growing number of voters concerned about climate change — a crisis they see only worsening without a change in the White House in November.

The state of the climate was spotlighted on Aug. 19, the penultimate night of the mostly virtual convention, when Democrats homed in on the convergence of climate change, jobs and justice as a key plank for voters to decide the fate of the 2020 election.

A video segment narrated by a union electrical worker compared the challenge of global warming to the moon race, and with it, the potential for creating millions of clean energy jobs. Young Americans across the country told of climate change's impact on their lives: a woman in California battling asthma and driven to activism from the devastating 2018 Camp Fire; a corn farmer in Wisconsin with lower crop yields "because of unpredictable and torrential spring rains" and environmental activists in Detroit and Las Vegas "facing the burden of pollution" and related health problems in their neighborhoods.

"Switching to renewable energy would mean cleaner air, better health and a steadier income for folks in neighborhoods like mine," said Katherine Lorenzo, a climate activist in Nevada.

Other speakers throughout the convention spoke in similar terms, saying that a "clean energy revolution" could present an economic windfall for Americans, and that confronting racism also means combating climate change. In that framing, they echoed the way Joe Biden has positioned the issue along the campaign trail to the Democratic presidential nomination.



Younger environmental activists delivered remarks near the start of the Democratic National Convention program Aug. 19. From left: Alexandria Villaseñor, Davis, California; Justin Onwenu, Detroit, Michigan; Andrew Adamski, Seymour, Wisconsin; and Katherine Lorenzo, Las Vegas, Nevada (NCR composite screenshots/YouTube/Democratic National Convention)

In his acceptance speech Thursday, the longtime senator listed climate change among "a perfect storm" of "four historic crises" facing America at once, alongside the coronavirus pandemic, the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression and a moment of racial reckoning not seen since the 1960s civil rights movement.

"We can and we will deal with climate change. It's not only a crisis, it's an enormous opportunity," Biden said. "An opportunity for Americans to lead the world in clean energy and create millions of new, good-paying jobs in the process."

The U.S. election outcome will have major repercussions for the global effort to limit climate change to non-catastrophic temperatures. Three years ago, President Donald Trump announced his inteintion to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement. That exit is set to take effect Nov. 4 — the day after the election. Throughout his presidency, Trump has rolled back more than 100 environmental regulations, including most of the key climate policies enacted by his predecessor, Barack Obama.

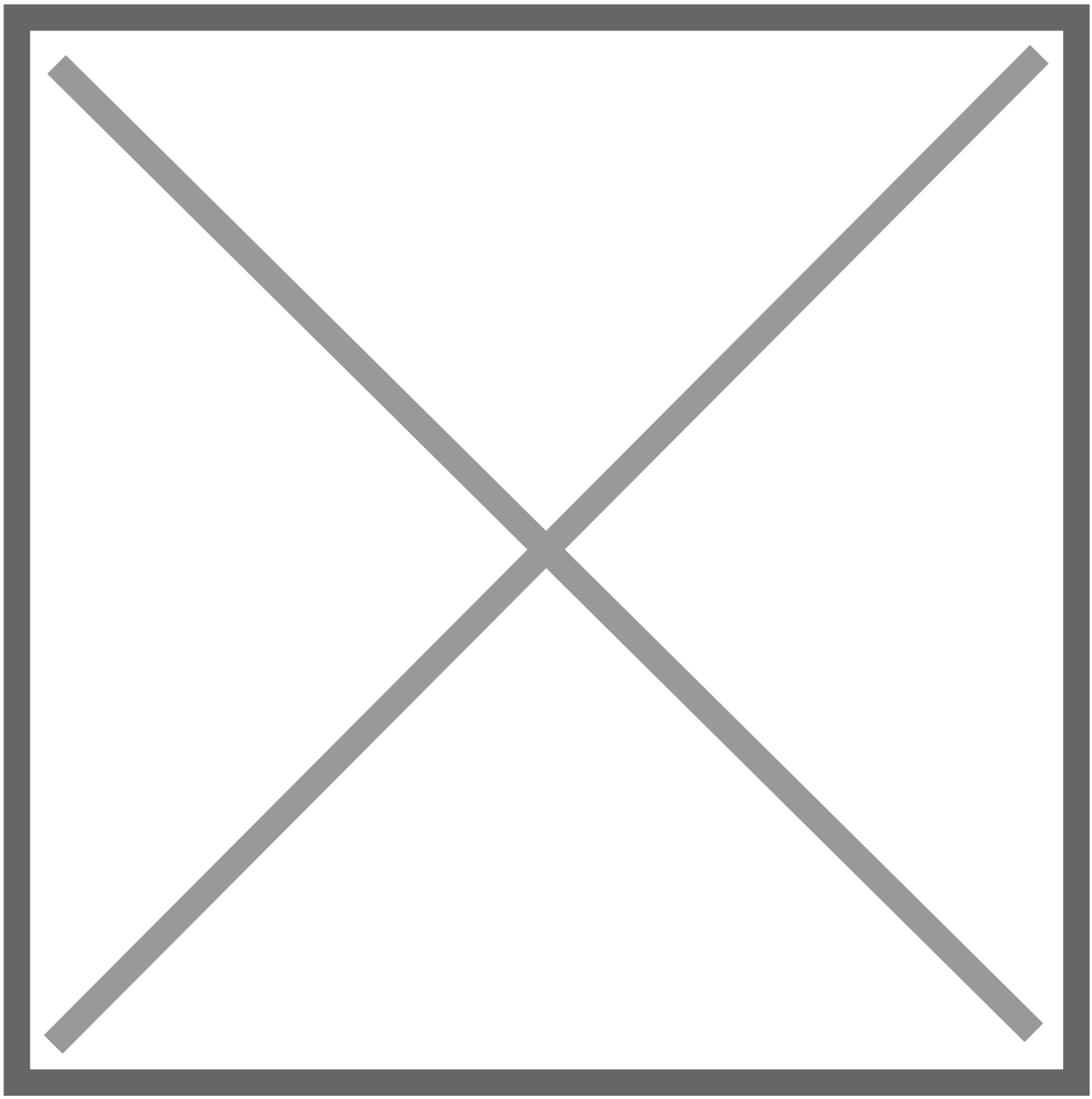
On Aug. 17, the day the Democratic convention began, the Trump administration finalized a plan that would open the Alaskan Wildlife Arctic Refuge to oil and gas drilling. On Sunday, a peak temperature of 130 degrees Fahrenheit was reported in California's Death Valley — if verified, what would be among the hottest

temperatures reliably recorded on the planet. Meanwhile, wildfires are raging in other parts of California, and the Southeast and Atlantic states face one of the most active hurricane seasons in years. Scientists link more frequent extreme weather events to global warming.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, described to the convention Thursday the scene on the ground a mile away from one of the state's 370 wildfires: "The hots are getting hotter, the dries are getting drier. Climate change is real. If you are in denial about climate change, come to California."

Climate change has grown as an important issue for many voters in 2020. A majority of Americans called it a top priority for the president and Congress in a February Pew Research Center poll — a high mark in the survey's nearly 20-year history. But that was before the coronavirus pandemic surged, taking precedence in the minds of voters.

In a July Pew survey, 42% of registered voters rated climate change "very important" to their vote in the 2020 presidential election, placing it just outside the top 10 issues. Nevertheless, climate remains a top concern for Democrats. It is also key for young voters of all political leanings, who consistently place it among their top three issues, according to numerous surveys. A recent poll showed 70% of voters in favor of federal COVID-19 stimulus funding going to clean energy rather than fossil fuels.



Flames from the LNU Lighting Complex Fire are seen along Interstate 80 near Vacaville, Califorina, Aug. 19. (CNS/Reuters/Stephen Lam)

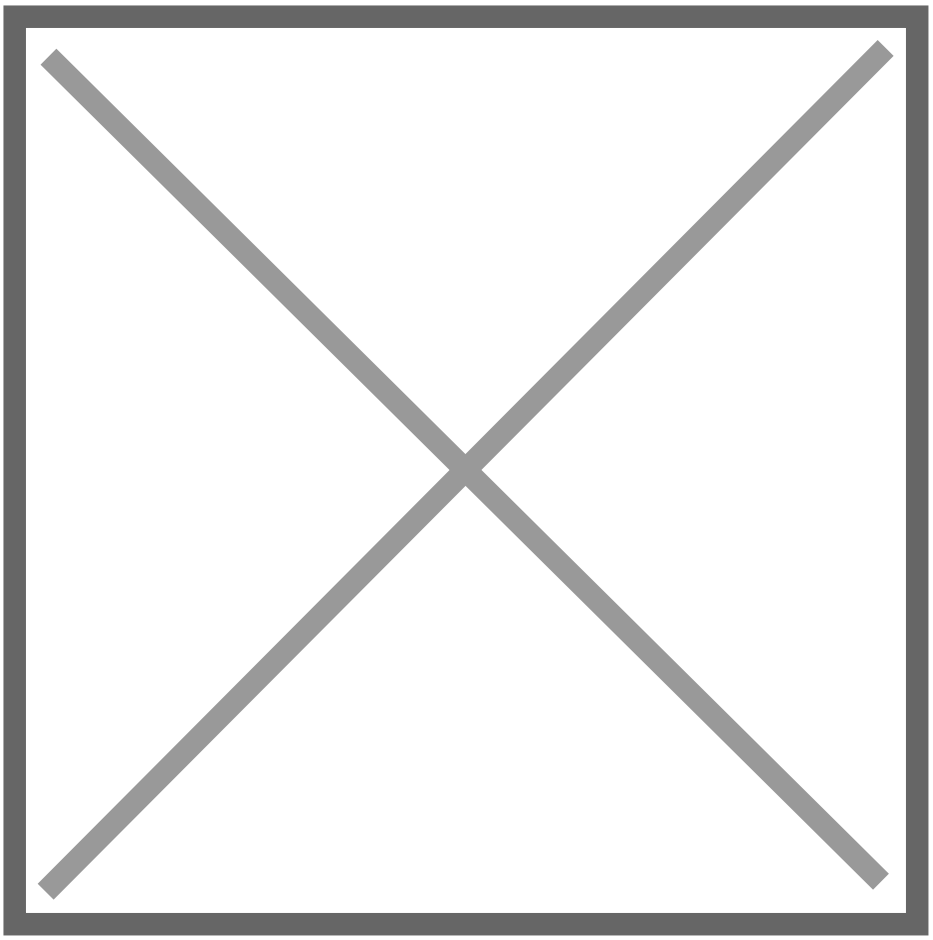
Biden's proposals on environmental issues, becoming bolder with his ascent to the nomination, have regularly come back to two words: jobs and justice. That focus has galvanized support from a broad coalition that includes environmental groups, unions, faith communities and people living with the daily reality of pollution in their neighborhoods.

Biden, who is Catholic, states on his campaign website the need to act as stewards of creation and said that "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, "directed the global community to raise awareness about the growing climate change crisis."

The Democratic presidential nominee has called for committing $2 trillion over the next four years to shift the U.S. economy to 100% clean energy and net-zero greenhouse gas emissions no later than 2050, and a carbon-free power sector by 2035. Investment in electric vehicles and charging stations, infrastructure and energy efficiency would create upwards of 10 million union jobs, he says, with 40% of clean-energy spending benefiting disadvantaged communities.

On environmental justice, the former vice president proposed creating screening tools to identify communities at greatest risk from climate change, environmental pollution and racial inequality, and establishing an environmental and climate justice division in the Justice Department. He pledged to hold polluters accountable, establish new monitoring and notification requirements, and work to eliminate legacy pollution in low-income and indigenous communities.

In his speech, Biden touted the voices of the nation's young speaking out against racial injustice, economic injustice and environmental injustice, saying his plan to "build back better" would be done "with pipes that transport clean water to every community."



Cars in Coyote Canyon, New Mexico, on the Navajo reservation, line up to receive food at a food distribution point before the start of a weekend-long curfew May 15. (CNS/Reuters/David Wallace, The Republic, USA TODAY NETWORK)

The disproportionate impact of climate change and pollution on poor and marginalized communities has been long been a point of focus for religious groups. The pandemic has only highlighted the connections, as COVID-19 has disproportionately spread among communities of color.

Dan Misleh, executive director of the Catholic Climate Covenant, called Biden's climate plan "ambitious but hopeful." He singled out the focus on renewable energy and energy efficiency, saying both have been shown to contribute to economic growth and lower greenhouse gas emissions.

Many of Biden's plans appear in the Democratic Party platform. Environmental groups, though, have criticized the platform for not including an end to oil and gas subsidies, and Biden for not ruling out fracking or nuclear energy.

Misleh added there was no mention of a price on carbon — a policy supported by the U.S. bishops — and that changing people's behavior to reduce fossil fuel consumption would be difficult without one. Also missing was an assessment of consumerism and how American lifestyles affect others around the world, he added, although he conceded that would be hard to legislate.

Still, Biden's climate proposal — developed through a task force with Sen. Bernie Sanders after earlier ideas were maligned as lacking ambition — has drawn comparisons to the Green New Deal, though he has not fully endorsed that congressional resolution. Biden's proposal has received backing from environmental groups like the Sierra Club and Sunrise Movement, as well as unions representing autoworkers, electrical workers and pipe fitters, along with the head of the AFL-CIO, Richard Trumpka.

Tweet from @RichardTumpka's Twitter account July 14, 2020

It also has support in the environmental justice community.

Over the summer, Biden's campaign consulted with the National Black Environmental Justice Network (NBEJN), as reported by Vice News. The network, which had disbanded in 2006, formed again in June. Robert Bullard, co-chair of the NBEJN, said Democrats' proposals this election season, including a climate action plan in the House, have elevated environmental justice to the highest level in his four decades of work.

"There's no doubt about it that in the past we've had climate change and climate issues that somehow were not up to par and up to speed, that somehow just did not embrace the justice part and the equity part," he told EarthBeat.

Bullard said the proposals reflect NBEJN's meetings with Biden's team, beginning with adopting their definition of the environment as the place where people live, work, play, worship and learn, as well as the physical and natural world.

"All these things are converging, so that the equity lens, the justice lens now would not only connect just climate, it'll also connect health, housing, food security, issues around land use and planning, issues around jobs," he said. That equity lens for redefining the environment "is being adopted in a very accelerated way," Bullard added. "And that's a good thing."

Related: What does the Democrats' climate plan have to say about environmental justice?

The NBEJN also supported Biden's pick of Kamala Harris as his running mate. Harris "has the opportunity to propel the fight for environmental and climate justice into a broader conversation," NBEJN director Tina Johnson write in a recent op-ed for The Hill.

"The overwhelming feeling is that we have a fighter in Harris, which is a necessary quality for getting climate legislation and regulations that would affect Black communities and other minority and low-income communities, who are on the frontlines of climate change during a Biden administration and beyond," Johnson wrote.

Days before being tapped as Biden's vice-presidential pick, Harris and U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez introduced the Climate Equity Act, which would establish an Office of Climate and Environmental Justice Accountability and require the federal government to consider how environmental legislation and regulations impact low-income communities.

Harris co-sponsored a separate bill that would strengthen laws under the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibiting polluting actions that disproportionately hurt poor communities, require that the cumulative impacts of a project be considered in the permitting process and provide funds for workers and communities transitioning from fossil fuel-dependent economies.

For Bullard, the combination of proposals and legislation coming from the top of the Democratic ticket contrast starkly with the "aggressive attack on environmental protection" under Trump.

"It's night and day," he said. "There is no comparison."

Advertisement

Before Trump entered the White House in January 2017, Creation Justice Ministries, which represents three dozen faith groups, sent him a letter outlining their principles and policy recommendations for protecting God's creation. Among them: carbon and methane pollution standards for power plants and other sources of greenhouse gas

emissions; investing in renewable energy; preserving public and Native American lands from mining; and leading globally on climate through the Paris Agreement and financing for climate change adaptation and mitigation.

In every case, the president did the opposite.

"The Trump administration has shown us a track record of rolling back core, bedrock environmental protections," said Shantha Ready Alonso, executive director of Creation Justice Ministries, which is the ecological justice partner of the National Council of Churches.

Alonso acknowledged some positives, such as funding for national parks and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. But over the past four years, the organization has spent more time fighting than applauding Trump policies like pushing drilling in Alaska's protected regions and uranium mining in the Grand Canyon and rolling back rules on methane pollution.

Creation Justice Ministries, which does not endorse candidates, said it was encouraged to see the Biden campaign include in its policy proposals environmental justice, support for a just energy transition and respect for science.

"It's important for anyone who's running for president to center the concerns of people and how those concerns intersect with the need to protect God's creation," Alonso said.

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