News
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President Joe Biden is pictured after speaking at Prince William Forest Park on Earth Day, April 22, 2024, in Triangle, Virginia. Biden announced $7 billion in federal grants to provide residential solar projects serving low- and middle-income communities and expanding his American Climate Corps green jobs training program. (AP/Manuel Balce Ceneta)



by Brian Roewe

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The election-rattling decision by President Joe Biden to not seek a second term was less than a week old when Robert Bullard, "the father of environmental justice," arrived at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. for the first-ever White House summit on environmental justice.

The event Wednesday sought to highlight progress by the Biden-Harris administration in its three-and-a-half years in office in limiting pollution, creating healthier communities and addressing environmental inequities.

Bullard, a member of the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council who's worked four decades on the intersection of pollution and racism, told EarthBeat on his way to the summit he was saddened by Biden's decision but supported the man he called "an excellent president."

"When it comes to the work of elevating environmental justice, this administration has moved the needle further than any one administration on environmental justice that I have worked with," Bullard said.

Other environmental activists, including leaders of Catholic and other faith-based groups, have joined in commending the 81-year-old Biden for his decision Sunday — the hottest day ever recorded, until Monday surpassed it — to leave the presidential race, with Vice President Kamala Harris in line to take his place, while touting his major accomplishments on climate policy and environmental protections, even amid perceived shortfalls.

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"Biden has been the strongest environmental president that we've ever had, and has done more to fight global warming than any other president," said Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, senior analyst for Religion News Service and longtime observer of the nation's religious and political arenas.

Marianne Comfort, justice coordinator for Earth, anti-racism and women for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, noted, "While the president will likely be most remembered for bold policies that incentivize the transition to a renewable energy economy, we need to point out that his record is mixed in protecting communities overburdened by fossil fuel and other polluting industries."

The greatest policy victory for Biden, the nation's second Catholic president, came in August 2022, when he signed into law the Inflation Reduction Act — the nation's largest-ever investment, more than $300 billion over the next decade, to address climate change and decarbonize the nation's power sector by 2035 and reach net-zero emissions economy-wide no later than midcentury.

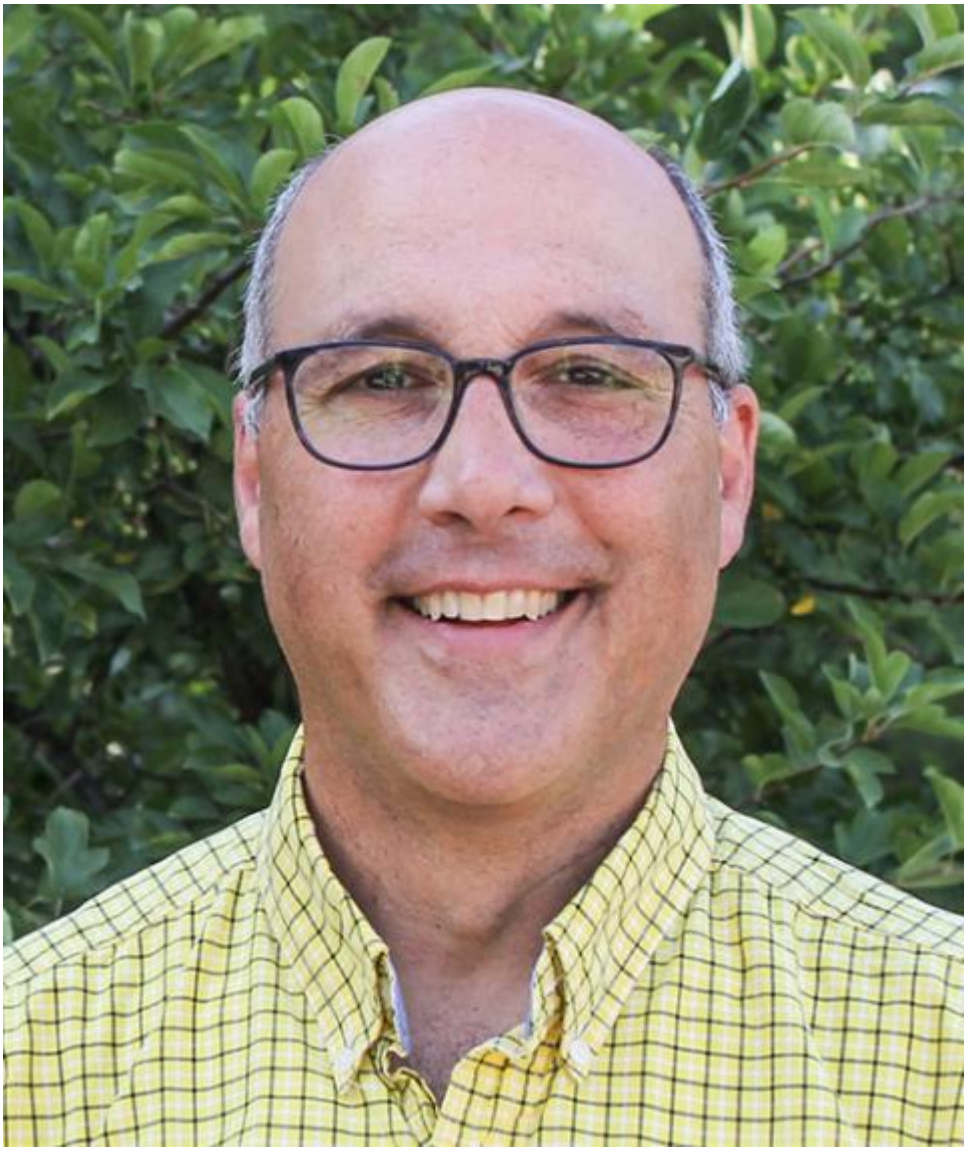


President Joe Biden holds out his pen to Sen. Joe Manchin, D-West Virginia, as Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-New York, and then-House Majority Whip James Clyburn, D-South Carolina, look on in the State Dining Room of the White House in Washington Aug. 16, 2022, after Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 into law. (CNS/Reuters/Leah Millis)

If fully implemented, the law's climate investments would make up the bulk of the U.S. pledge Biden submitted under the Paris Agreement to cut national greenhouse gas emissions by half from 2005 levels by 2030. A new report from the independent Rhodium Group showed U.S. emissions declining faster than ever before — down 18% compared to 2005 — and tracking to fall 38% to 56% by 2035.

Many of the tax incentives in the Inflation Reduction Act are aimed to help American businesses, households and even houses of worship cut the costs of solar panels, electric vehicles and other energy-saving upgrades. The law also allocated $60 billion toward environmental justice initiatives, but included concessions mandating oil and gas lease sales on federal lands and waters.

Combining funds within three bills Biden signed into law — the Inflation Reduction Act, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the CHIPS Act — the U.S. is set to spend $80 billion annually this decade on climate change.



Dan Misleh (EarthBeat photo/Brian Roewe)

Dan Misleh, executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant, called the president's impact on environmental and climate policy "monumental."

"No president has done more for the environment than Biden, in terms of sheer dollars and programs," he said. "It's pretty significant."

Catholic Climate Covenant was among many faith-based organizations advocating for the passage of the major federal climate bill, a goal of environmentalists for more than three decades. So too was Interfaith Power & Light, a national network of houses of worship and faith-based organizations working to address climate change and care for creation.

In a statement, Interfaith Power & Light president the Rev. Susan Hendershot thanked Biden for his climate leadership and commitment to environmental justice.

"We have to look down the road to the future that we're leaving for our children, our grandchildren, all those who are coming after us," she told EarthBeat. "And I think this is a place that I have just a huge amount of respect for President Biden, because I do believe that this is a deeply held moral conviction on his part."

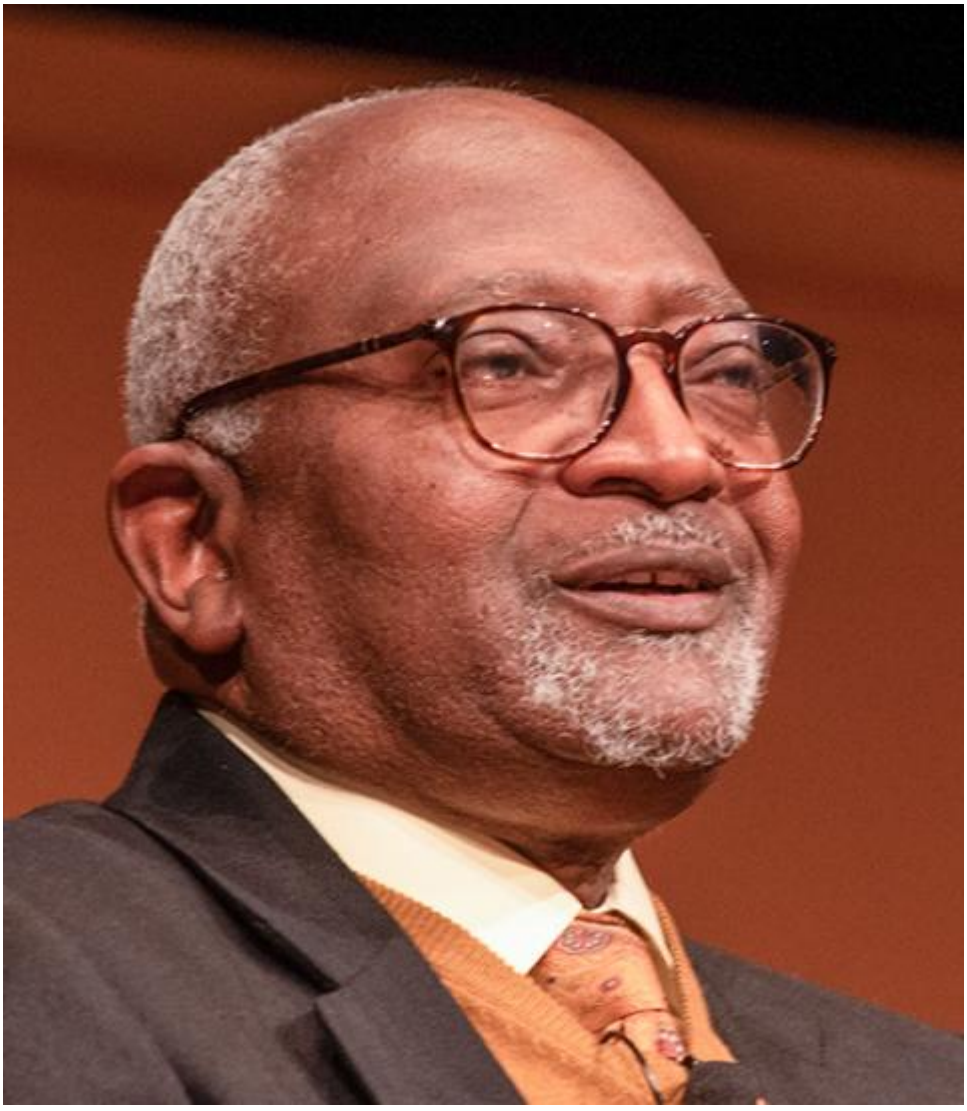


President Joe Biden delivers remarks on tackling climate change at the White House in Washington Jan. 27, 2021, prior to signing executive actions. Also pictured are John Kerry, then special presidential envoy for climate, and Vice President Kamala Harris. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

On his first day in office, Biden reentered the U.S. into the Paris Agreement, which his predecessor Donald Trump had exited. Under Biden, climate diplomacy has been a priority of the State Department, even hosting a virtual climate summit of world leaders, including Pope Francis, on Earth Day 2021.

Domestically, Biden has taken a government-wide approach to climate change, and made environmental justice a priority across the Cabinet.

More than attention and enthusiasm, the Biden administration has put resources behind environmental justice, Bullard said. The Justice40 Initiative directs 40% of federal spending on climate, clean energy and housing toward historically disadvantaged communities. Other initiatives, like the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Solar for All and Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Grantmaking programs, will have tremendous impact, he said.



Robert Bullard (Flickr/University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability)

"We've never had that kind of resources that was targeted specifically for environmental and climate justice," said Bullard, a professor of urban planning and environmental policy at Texas Southern University.

The Biden administration has sought to reestablish more than 100 environmental regulations undone by Trump, with the EPA leading the charge. That has included the strongest-ever limit on vehicle tailpipe emissions that's expected to lead to the majority of new cars being electric or hybrid by 2032.

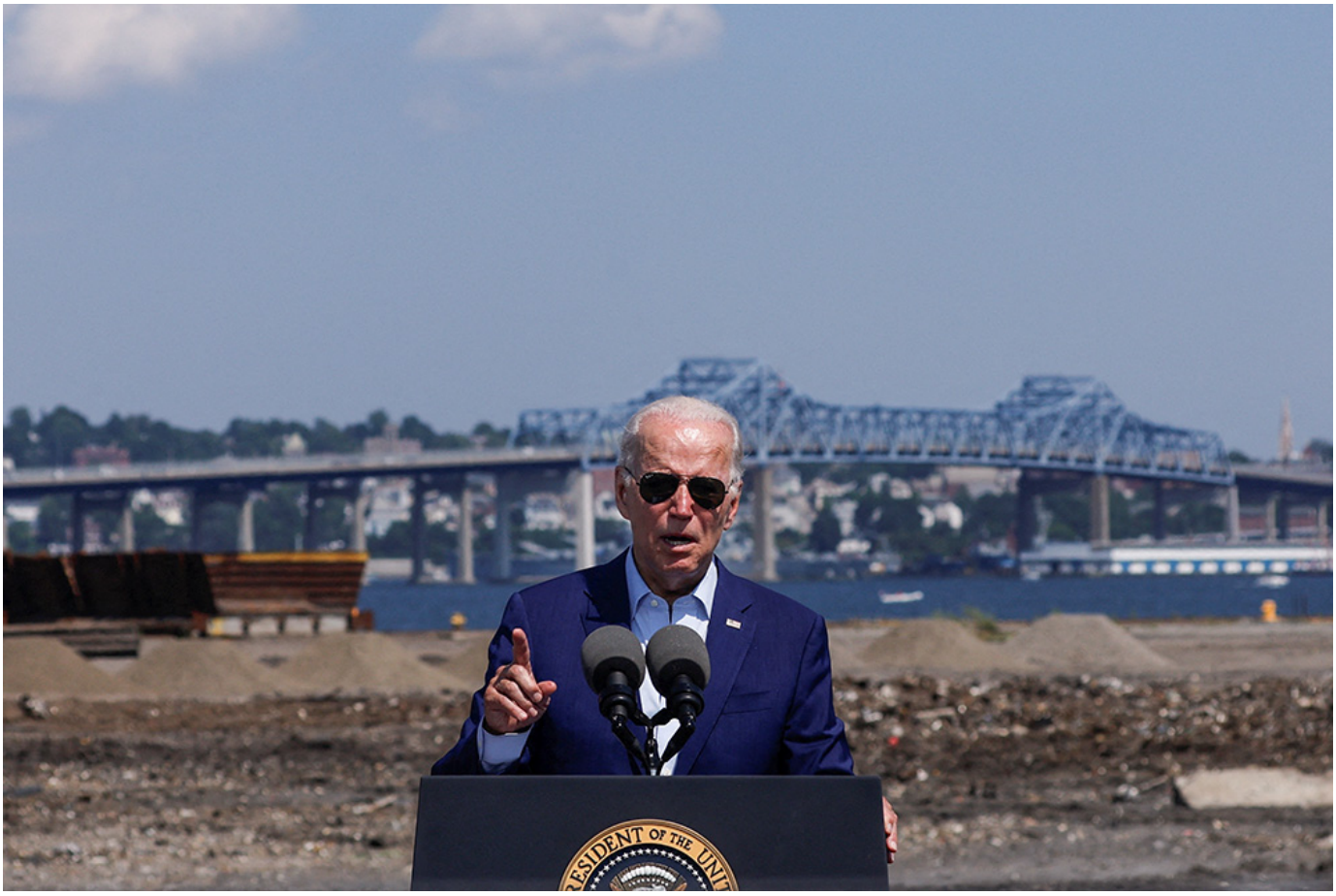
Other rules finalized by Biden's EPA aim to slash emissions from new and existing power plants, plug methane leaks, place further limits on soot pollution, asbestos and toxic chemicals, and enact the first-ever ban on "forever chemicals" in water systems.

Related: Fordham University set to invest in environmental justice with $50 million EPA grant

Biden established a goal of conserving 30% of U.S. lands by 2030, and has placed more than 41 million acres of lands and water under conservation. That has included restoring lands to Bears Ears National Monument, designating Indigenous lands near the Grand Canyon as a national monument, and ending drilling and proposing further protections in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The president also established the American Climate Corps, a program to employ 20,000 young people in areas of clean energy, conservation and climate resilience.

"You combine those and stack those with the regulatory work that's happening with EPA, Department of Transportation, Department of Energy and others. You know that that adds up in a very significant way," said Hendershot, also a member of the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council.



President Joe Biden delivers remarks on climate change and renewable energy at the site of the former Brayton Point Power Station in Somerset, Massachusetts, July 20, 2022. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

"I think it's a huge legacy, really. I mean, the implications of all of this taken together as a package," she said.

Another part of that legacy, Hendershot added, has been Biden's engagement with the faith community. Numerous agencies include a faith outreach office or team, including FEMA, the Energy Department and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The influence of Biden's Catholic faith in his environmental focus is evident not through the president quoting papal encyclicals in speeches, but in how the actions reflect church teaching, Reese said.

"He's concerned about people, he's concerned about the working class, he's concerned about the environment. And those are all the things that are in Catholic

social teaching: the stress on human dignity, the stress on concern for the poor and the environment," he said.



Marianne Comfort (CNS/Carol Zimmermann)

But steps forward by the Biden administration on climate change and environmental protections have been accompanied by other decisions that have extended dependency on fossil fuels — the primary driver of global warming — and put people and ecosystems near extractive industries at risk.

Comfort said the requirement in the Inflation Reduction Act to offer public lands for oil and gas exploration was a compromise that endangers the well-being of nearby communities, who are often low-income and people of color. Such a trade-off, she said, can't be justified even in pursuit of a larger goal "as important as addressing

the climate crisis."

These communities "time and again finding themselves on the fence lines of fossil fuel extraction and production," she told EarthBeat.

Michele Dunne, executive director of Franciscan Action Network, agreed, calling Biden's record "mixed" on climate and environmental issues.



Michele Dunne (Courtesy of Franciscan Action Network)

She noted the positives of passing major climate legislation and reengaging the global community to address the threat of rapidly rising temperatures. But those achievements are diminished by the rapid pace of oil and gas drilling permits

authorized by the Biden administration, issuing 50% more than Trump in their first three years in office. The U.S. remains the world's largest user and producer of oil and gas.

Environmental groups have also criticized funds for carbon capture and sequestration technologies and "clean hydrogen" projects.

"Biden acknowledged climate change and took some action — important actions — based on it, and yet he didn't do everything he could have done," Dunne said.

Related: Biden's greenlight for major Alaska oil project draws moral rebukes

With five months left in his presidency, opportunities for Biden to add to his environmental record will be limited, especially in Congress. Environmental groups have already urged Biden to use his remaining time in the White House to permanently block future liquified natural gas export terminals and to also declare climate change a federal emergency to unlock further resources.



Environmental activists in Washington march toward the White House June 30, 2021, to demand that President Joe Biden stop fossil fuel projects and put climate justice at the heart of his infrastructure plans. (CNS/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)

From there, the trajectory of federal environmental action will be determined by the November election.

Harris, the presumptive Democratic nominee, has a long track record of environmental action, including support as a senator for the Green New Deal. A climate adviser for Harris told The New York Times her focus as president would be on implementing the Inflation Reduction Act.

Trump, the Republican nominee, has denied climate change and spent his presidency aggressively scaling back environmental regulations. Project 2025, a conservative blueprint for a second Trump term, has targeted eliminating federal restrictions on fossil fuel drilling, cutting investments in renewables, and significantly reducing the federal government's ability to issue climate and environmental regulations and policies, including shuttering NOAA and the National Weather Service.

"I'm terrified for the environment if Trump gets back into the presidency," Reese said. "He could turn the clock back and wipe out everything that Biden has done."

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 16-29, 2024** print issue under the headline: As Biden exits presidential race, faith activists applaud impact on climate policy.