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U.S. President Joe Biden delivers his final address to the 79th United Nations General Assemb

U.S. President Joe Biden delivers his final address to the 79th United Nations General Assembly at U.N. headquarters in New York City Sept. 24, 2024. (OSV News photo//Mike Segar, Reuters)

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With just a month left in office, the Biden administration is setting a bold new target for U.S. climate action.

The White House announced Dec. 19 a national goal that would see the country's greenhouse gas emissions drop 61% to 66% below 2005 levels by 2035. That would keep the United States on a "straight line" trajectory toward President Joe Biden's ultimate goal of hitting net zero emissions by 2050, officials said. If that happens, it would mean the country is only emitting as much carbon as it's simultaneously sequestering through techniques like restoring forests and wetlands — in other words, that it's no longer playing any part in warming the planet.

The announcement is the latest in a series of climate-related actions Biden is taking during his final months in office. In the last week alone, his administration pushed for an international deal to limit global fossil fuel finance and published a study that cautioned against new export infrastructure for liquefied natural gas. These actions are designed to shore up environmental action ahead of President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration in January.

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Just as he did during his first term, Trump is promising to boost fossil fuels when he takes office next year. He's also pledged to claw back funding from Biden's landmark climate legislation, the Inflation Reduction Act, which provides billions of dollars in subsidies and tax breaks to supercharge renewable energy adoption, and to once again pull the United States out of the landmark Paris climate agreement, the 2015 United Nations accord intended to limit global warming to under 2 degrees Celsius compared to preindustrial levels. (That withdrawal process took years when Trump first tried it, but it will likely move much faster this time.)

"The Biden-Harris administration may be about to leave office, but we're confident in America's ability to rally around this new climate program," said John Podesta, the administration's senior climate advisor, on a call with reporters. "While the United States federal government under President Trump may put climate action on the back burner, the work to contain climate change is going to continue in the United States with commitment and passion and belief."

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Podesta maintained that the Inflation Reduction Act, or IRA, and other federal policies have created enough momentum that emissions will continue to decline without further federal encouragement. He noted that the private sector has announced $450 billion in investments in clean energy projects over the past four years, much of which was stimulated by the IRA, and more investment is likely to follow even under Trump's tenure. A study from Princeton University found that the law will be enough to reduce U.S. emissions by as much as 48% by 2035 — a good portion of the way toward the new goal, but not all the way there.

Much of the work will fall on states, who regulate their own utilities and can promote the switch to renewable energy sources. Cities run their own public transportation systems and set energy-efficiency building codes. Governors and mayors have long collaborated on more ambitious goals than the federal government, even under Democratic administrations.

"Across the country," White House National Climate Advisor Ali Zaidi said in the press call Wednesday, "we see decarbonization efforts to reduce our emissions in many ways achieving escape velocity, an inexorable path, a place from which we will not turn back."

A wide coalition of governors, mayors, tribes, and companies has pledged to continue climate progress over the next four years under Trump, and more than 200 of these entities have laid out their own climate plans. They can attempt their own decarbonization efforts, as New York state plans to do through its new congestion pricing policy in Manhattan, or by litigating against Trump's emissions-boosting policies, as California Gov. Gavin Newsom has said he plans to do.

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Fundamental market forces are also at work. The prices of renewables like solar panels and wind turbines, plus the batteries to store that energy, have been plummeting. That's partly why Texas — not exactly a bastion of climate action — now generates more renewable energy than any other state. And heat pumps — which move heat into a home using electricity instead of fossil fuels — now outsell gas furnaces in the U.S.

"Pioneering offshore wind farms are delivering clean power," Zaidi said. "Retired nuclear plants are coming back online. America is racing forward on solar and batteries. Not just the deployment, but also the means to stamp those products ‘Made in America.'"

The new plan places particular emphasis on efforts to reduce emissions of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas that warms the earth around 80 times as fast as carbon dioxide but lingers in the atmosphere for a shorter time period. Biden has rolled out regulations designed to penalize the huge share of methane emissions that come from the oil and gas sector, a move that even Exxon Mobil CEO Darren Woods has asked Trump not to repeal. Last month, at the United Nations' international climate meeting, COP29, the U.S. announced a partnership with China to track methane leakage from oil infrastructure and develop technologies to mitigate it. The administration said it expects methane emissions to fall by 35% over the next decade if the nation meets its broader climate target.

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The United States is submitting its new target as part of its requirements under the Paris Agreement. The treaty calls on every country to outline its climate ambitions every five years in documents known as "nationally determined contributions," or NDCs. When he took office in 2021, Biden set a national pledge to reduce the country's greenhouse gas emissions by 50 to 52% from 2005 levels by 2030. The new 61-66% target for 2035 puts the U.S. in the middle of the pack when it comes to this round of Paris climate plans, which are due from all countries in February. The United Kingdom announced a much more ambitious 81% reduction target at COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, last month, while the United Arab Emirates has only committed to a 47% reduction over the same period. Brazil, which is hosting COP30 next year, has a goal that is similar to Biden's.

Some advocacy organizations chastised Biden for not setting an even more ambitious target, one in line with that of the United Kingdom.

"With a climate denier about to enter the White House, the Biden administration's new national climate plan represents the bare minimum floor for climate action," said Ashfaq Khalfan, the climate justice director at Oxfam America, the U.S. chapter of the global anti-poverty advocacy organization. "It falls far short of the U.S.'s fair share of emissions reduction as the world's largest historical polluter."

But others praised Biden for trying to ratchet up climate ambition despite the dark short-term outlook. Rachel Cleetus, the climate policy director at the Union of Concerned Scientists, said other nations would appreciate that the outgoing government had set a realistic target for the nation's climate ambition.

"I think the international community will welcome the U.S. showing it understands the importance of doing its part to meet global climate goals," she said. "There will be challenges, for sure, but what's not reasonable is letting political winds dictate the future of the planet and the safety of people now and for generations to come."

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