

For our health, Trump administration should keep Clean Power Plan (Commentary)



Environmental Protection Agency Administrator-designate, Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt is seen on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, Jan. 18, 2017, at his confirmation hearing before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. (J. Scott Applewhite / AP)



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During the presidential election campaign, Donald Trump **declared global climate change a hoax** and vowed to kill the Clean Power Plan - President Barack Obama's rule limiting greenhouse gas emissions from power plants. His nomination of Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt to lead the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) suggests that his views of climate disruption have not changed.

Trump coupled his rejection of climate science with a campaign pledge to **promote "clean air."** He reiterated this promise even as he announced his nomination of Pruitt, himself a climate-change denier and **litigious opponent** of the Clean Power Plan. If Trump were serious about keeping his clean air promise, he would implement the Clean Power Plan in spite of his and Pruitt's stated opposition to the rule.

Pruitt and Trump will find jettisoning the rule more difficult than they might imagine. The Clean Air Act requires that EPA regulate greenhouse gas emissions from power plants, and EPA promulgated this rule pursuant to a consent decree. If Pruitt simply withdraws the rule, a court will promptly reverse his action. Also, many utilities have made significant investments in compliance and will not appreciate a sudden reversal of policy. Finally, because Pruitt represented a party opposing the rule in court in the last year, his participation in any decision on the Clean Power Plan would raise serious questions about compliance with ethics rules requiring impartial decision-makers.

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Should Trump and Pruitt succeed in jettisoning the Clean Power Plan, they will betray their promise to deliver clean air. The Clean Power Plan promotes increased reliance on natural gas, renewable energy, and improved energy efficiency. These actions not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions, they also reduce smog and soot. Indeed, it's quite clear that the Clean Power Plan would make sense even if climate disruption really were a hoax because it reduces air pollution breathed in by millions of Americans.

The plan would diminish harms from poor air quality in all of the lower 48 states but would have its largest positive impacts in areas experiencing chronic air pollution. The Plan would prevent between 140,000 and 150,000 childhood asthma attacks annually. Such attacks sometimes require hospitalization and force kids to miss school and avoid healthy outdoor activities. Air pollution also kills people by triggering heart attacks and strokes, and it is estimated that the Plan would save between 2,700 and 6,600 lives a year by preventing such events. Even though New York has relative low pollutant emissions from electric utilities, it would be one of the largest beneficiaries of the Clean Power Plan because of its location downwind of high emitting states, with an estimated premature deaths avoided of 190 per year.

Both independent and EPA analysis suggest that the value of these "co-benefits" of the Plan - in other words, benefits other than the ones related to climate change - would exceed the dollar value EPA calculated for its greenhouse-gas-related benefits. That's because the Clean Power Plan saves so many lives from the ravages of routine air pollution, it generates monetized benefits far exceeding its costs - despite the fact that analysts have not been able to monetize many of the known benefits.

Because of cheap natural gas and the growing availability and decreased cost of renewable energy, since 2008, electric utilities have shifted away from coal. These market forces have helped drive improvements in air quality, and it's likely that this transition will continue. But Trump should realize that the Clean Power Plan would accelerate a modernization of our energy infrastructure.

In fact, Trump could keep the Clean Power Plan and still help coal miners. Coal miners have been losing jobs for years, primarily due to mountaintop removal techniques that allow coal companies to shed jobs while destroying local environments, as well as increased competition from natural gas and renewables. Killing the Clean Power Plan will not halt the loss of coal mining jobs because it will not stop automation at coal mines or competition from cheaper technologies. However, Trump could invest in infrastructure projects in Appalachia and put an end to mountaintop removal if he's serious about helping workers. Killing the Clean Power Plan will kill and sicken thousands of Americans while doing nothing for coal miners.

Trump can honor his campaign pledge to protect clean air by implementing the Clean Power Plan. Doing otherwise won't just mean going back on a campaign promise; it'll also take a very real toll on Americans' health.

Editorial: President Trump's challenge is to lead and deliver