

Yesterday, flanked by a few coal miners in hard hats, Trump signed four executive orders to restore their industry to its past glory. Given that coal is now the most expensive way to generate power other than nuclear, that's going to be a heavy lift.

Like many of Trump's orders, these four are full of threats and bluster but will have little immediate effect. There's a consolation prize for coal companies: Trump [promised](#) them that the big law firms who have caved to his threats would be dispatched to represent them in court pro bono.

Turning to the four orders, they give the same impression as many executive orders — that Something Important is Being Done — but they are really more in the way of promises of future action. Here's a rundown on the four orders.

The title of [one of the orders](#) begins as a kind of rhapsody to humanity's dirtiest fuel source but trails away into bureaucratic obscurity: "Reinvigorating America's Beautiful Clean Coal Industry and Amending Executive Order 14241." That last part turns out to be a correction of a numbering error in a previous executive order. Anyway, according to Trump, "Our Nation's beautiful clean coal resources will be critical to meeting the rise in electricity demand due to the resurgence of domestic manufacturing and the construction of artificial intelligence data processing centers."

Getting down to brass tacks, Trump then classifies coal as a mineral for purposes of another executive order, calls on agencies to prioritize mining as a land use on public lands, calls for streamlining environmental reviews for coal mines, and so forth. Those are undoubtedly bad ideas. Agencies will be deservedly sued when they try to implement them.

Another presidential action is technically a [proclamation](#) rather than an executive order, a distinction of no importance to anyone. Taking advantage of a loophole in the Clean Air Act, Trump is extending the deadline for coal plants to comply with new mercury restrictions from 2027 to 2029. His basis for allowing them extra time to emit a highly toxic metal is rather specious, but an extra two-year delay isn't exactly earthshaking. It will be interesting to see whether this proclamation is challenged in court and if so whether it's upheld.

A third "order" is essentially an [extended rant](#) about state clean energy efforts, with particular venom directed at the efforts by some states to get fossil fuel companies to pay for the harm they've done. Trump then asks the Attorney General to try to think of *something* that can be done. Given that the Civil Division is stretched very thin defending Trump's many encroachments on the rule of law, there would seem to be limited resources for filing scattershot lawsuits against states.

If nothing else, Trump's rage about state climate programs is a backhanded tribute to their significance. And of course, he can't stand the thought that anyone, anywhere, dares to stand against him.

That brings us to the [fourth order](#). It gives the Department of Energy thirty days to invent a methodology to assess areas with unsafe energy margins. Using this methodology, the Department will then come up with a protocol to prevent coal generators from leaving the grid or converting to gas. This is basically an effort to bail out uneconomic coal plants at the expense of consumers. It's not clear at all that DOE would be able to implement any such protocol. At the very least, there will be extensive litigation at that point.

There's no doubt that these orders will prompt agencies to do (or attempt to do) various bad things to the detriment of the environment, public health, and energy consumers. But none of those things have happened yet. Except for the two-year extension, these orders accomplish nothing that Trump couldn't have done with posts on Truth Social.

Trump wasn't able to save coal in his first term, when it continued its steady decline. He's not likely to be any more successful this time.