Just after the election, the environmental group Earthjustice published a list of six easy things the Obama administration could do to help the environment. On the list was the suggestion that Obama back off from defending Bush-era failures to ramp up the efficiency of home furnaces–a topic that sounds narrow but has remarkable implications for saving consumers money, reducing nationwide energy demands, and improving greenhouse gas emissions. Several states, environmental organizations and consumer advocates had challenged the Dept of Energy's 2007 decision to improve furnace efficiency standards by only 2%, to about 80% efficiency, an increase the state of California in this filing called "trivial," "paltry," and out of compliance with the Energy Policy and Conservation Act.

Yesterday, at the request of Obama's Department of Energy lawyers and about one week before oral argument was scheduled before the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, the 2007 regulations were essentially withdrawn, remanded back to DOE for reconsideration of the challenged rule and for consideration of new standards requiring at least 90% efficiency for home furnaces. According to the plaintiffs, a 90% efficiency standard would save consumers about 11% off their home heating bills, net about $11 billion in consumer savings, and reduce greenhouse gases by the amount emitted by about 25 million cars in a year.

Here's the NRDC press release. In a week that's been focused on Congress's efforts to create new, cap-and-trade mechanisms for reducing GHGs, it's a reminder (on top of the CAA endangerment finding) of how much authority Obama's administrative agencies already have to make important changes under existing law.