

Fighting the Trump/Ryan/Pruitt assault on environmental protection necessarily absorbs a huge amount of our energy. But eventually, the current conservative stranglehold on the national government will come to an end. Sooner or later, the government will once again come into more environmentally friendly hands. When that happens, we need to have practical, detailed proposals ready to go.

Some of these plans must involve administrative action like the Obama Administration's Clean Power Plan. But what one president accomplishes through regulation another president may be able to undo. We shouldn't give up on the idea of legislative action.

There are two reasons why it's important to be prepared in advance for better political times, if and when they come. The first is the most obvious. Such a period may be short-lived, as we saw in 2009-2010, when a period of Democratic control was cut short by conservative Republicans success in the off-year elections. So it's important to move quickly. Lacking concrete plans, environmental advocates could find themselves in the same position as Republicans have been with respect to healthcare, with a general goal in mind and no idea how to get there. It's important to be ready to move when that window opens. It's also important to have more than one plan. Ryan does have a thought-out approach to tax reform, but it depends on a border-adjustment tax that may not have political legs. It's hard to be sure what approach will work politically until you actually get to the point of action.

The other reason to be ready is subtler. Investment decisions are made with long time-lines. If it's clear that Democrats have concrete, politically feasible plans for addressing greenhouse gases, this will discourage investment in fossil fuel facilities and encourage investment in renewables and energy efficiency.

Some of this work is already going on. For example, Resources for the Future (the leading think tank in environmental economics), has done serious research on implementation of a carbon tax. And environmental advocates have the advantage of being better able to rely on real world experience. In two examples, California is running a real-time experiment in carbon trading, while Canada will soon be implementing a carbon fee.

Carbon taxes and auctioned allowances may have the additional advantage of qualifying for inclusion in the congressional budget reconciliation procedure. This would bypass the possibility of a Senate filibuster. The new Canadian system is especially intriguing because it allows states to opt-out by implementing an approved plan of their own. (I'm planning to blog about the Canadian approach in more detail soon.) This would allow states like California to continue with their own systems, easing the transition. Alternatively, the

federal legislation might be more like the Clean Power Plan, giving states broader discretion and perhaps lightening the burden on laggard states. But such an approach might not qualify under reconciliation rules, increasing the difficulty of enactment.

Climate change isn't the only area of retrograde action by the Trump Administration. Reestablishing protections for wilderness and coastal areas should also be a priority. There is likely to be a backlog of endangered species protections; these will need to be processed expeditiously.

Of course, even under the best of circumstances, there will be surprises, such as technological developments that we can't easily anticipate. There will also be resistance from Bush and Trump appointees on the bench - Democrats will need to make judicial appointments a much higher priority than in the past, and they will need to be much more careful to get the maximum gain possible with each appointee.

They say that in war, no plan survives contact with the enemy. Something similar seems to be true in politics - except that it sometimes seems no plan survives contact with your allies.

Still, in both situations, it's best to make plans, if only as a basis for later improvisation. We need to be thinking now about where we want to go later, when we have the chance to move forward.