



At the the heart of the [Green New Deal](#) — which demands slashing U.S. carbon emissions by 2030 by shifting to 100 percent clean energy — is a major conundrum. Even the most enthusiastic proponents of ambitious climate policy don't believe the goals are achievable, technologically let alone politically. Stanford Professor Marc Z. Jacobsen, for example, among the most ardent advocates for decarbonizing the electricity grid completely, [believes](#) that we can achieve 100 percent renewable energy by 2050, three decades after the Green New Deal's target date. Ernie Monitz, the former Secretary of Energy under President Obama, [laments](#) that he "cannot see how we could possibly go to zero carbon in a 10-year time frame." A number of columnists have noted that the Green New Deal will never become law because of its [expense](#), its [political impracticability](#) and its [technological infeasibility](#). And yet, the Green New Deal has attracted huge public support, the endorsement of all of the 2020 Democratic candidates for President, and a large number of Senators and members of Congress. It promises to mobilize a generation of young activists to work to solve the existential crisis of their lives.

Though I remain conflicted about a proposal that seems untethered to what is actually achievable, it's worth remembering that the Green New Deal is not the first environmental program to contain wildly ambitious and infeasible goals. The [1970 Clean Air Act](#) set broad-based national air standards and required auto companies to cut pollution from the tailpipes of cars by 90 percent in just five years. Senator Edmund Muskie's [words](#) about the Clean Air Act could be used to support the ambitions of the Green New Deal:

*The first responsibility of Congress is not the making of technological or economic judgments or even to be limited by what is or appears to be technologically or economically feasible. Our responsibility is to establish what the public interest requires to protect the health of persons. **This may mean that people and industries will be asked to do what seems to be impossible at the present time.***

Since the Clean Air Act was adopted, the six major pollutants it covers have dropped by [73 percent](#) even as the population and the economy have grown dramatically. [Lead](#), once commonplace in the air, in gasoline, and in the blood of children, has been almost completely eliminated as an air pollutant. No state in the country [violates](#) standards for carbon monoxide (Los Angeles used to violate it more than 100 times a year). The tailpipe standards pushed auto manufacturers and other innovative companies to develop and install

catalytic converters on all new automobiles, [considered](#) one of the greatest environmental inventions of all time. Cars today are [99 percent cleaner](#) than they were in 1970.

The [Clean Water Act](#) contained similarly ambitious goals. It declared that all pollution discharges would be banned by 1985. It set as a target that all U.S. water bodies be fishable and swimmable by 1983. And it backed up these goals with an ambitious new program that required every factory and industrial facility to get a permit to regulate pollution and allocated billions of dollars to clean up the nation's sewage. The [result](#), as my colleague Jim Salzman has written, is that the dumping of raw sewage is largely a thing of the past and we have doubled the number of water bodies that meet water quality standards.

Neither the Clean Air Act nor the Clean Water Act has been a complete success. The tailpipe standards weren't actually implemented until 1981 and many air districts around the country are not meeting today's tight air pollution standards for ozone and particulate pollution. [Hot spot pollution](#) remains a huge problem, especially for low income communities and communities of color. Many water bodies remain out of compliance with water quality standards, mainly because of what is known as non-point source pollution. The Trump Administration's agenda to roll back environmental progress promises to make our environmental problems worse.

And yet, our air and our water are far cleaner today because policy makers in the 1970s set wildly unrealistic, ambitious, expensive goals. They did so because the public demanded action and those public demands led to widespread bipartisan support for an "environmental moon shot." And so, despite my skepticism that the Green New Deal is feasible, or politically possible, or technologically sound, I am cheering Representative Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Markey on, at the top of my lungs, hoping that their wild ambition can change hearts and minds about the biggest environmental problem we have ever faced.

