

The continuing pandemic sometimes makes it feel like time is frozen. But 2021 was a big year for environmental policy.

Politics.

The biggest news of 2021, for the environment as well as other reasons, was the replacement of Donald Trump by Joseph Biden. On the **regulatory front**, the change in White House control instantly stopped the tide of rollbacks. The Biden Administration has begun to reverse those rollbacks. It is also seeking to implement important new regulations of its own, such as stringent new controls on methane emissions by the oil and gas industry. In December, EPA finalized new fuel efficiency standards for vehicles, undoing a Trump rollback and going somewhat beyond Obama's prior requirements.

In another key political development, Democrats won both of Georgia's Senate runoff elections, given the Democrats working control of the Senate by the tiniest of margins. The Democratic margin in the House is a bit bigger, but still uncomfortably thing.

Legislation.

Democrats were able to leverage those thin margins into passage of a **\$1.2 trillion infrastructure law**, of which about half is new funding. The law provides a heady influx of money for public transit, rail, electric vehicle charging stations, and transmission. It also closed a loophole that gave states the power to kill transmission projects they didn't like. The new transmission capacity is needed to support greater use of renewables. There was also major new spending to improve drinking water safety and fund other environmental programs.

The Courts.

On the judicial front, the D.C. Circuit struck down Trump's reversal of Obama's keystone climate policy, the Clean Power Plan. In a very worrisome development, the **Supreme Court** reached out to review that decision even though EPA had already said it was going to rethink the Trump regulation anyway. The conservative Justices appear eager to gut EPA's authority to regulate power plant emissions. Most other pending litigation against Trump's actions were put on hold and sent back to agencies following the change in administrations.

The States.

At the state level, there was a lot of action, just as there had been throughout the Trump Administration. Here are a few of the notable developments:

- **North Carolina** and **Illinois** both passed major new climate and clean energy policies in surprisingly bipartisan fashion. In a sane world, those would presage similar bipartisan at the federal level. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the world we're living in.
- **Washington State** adopted a cap-and-trade system and a bevy of other climate measures.
- **Oregon** required the elimination of all carbon emissions from its electricity system by 2040.
- **Massachusetts** set a 2050 net-zero target, with interim targets of 50% decreases in 2030 and 75% by 2040 (compared with 1990 levels).
- All **Nebraska** utilities (which are all government bodies) set carbon neutrality targets for midcentury.

The Globe.

Internationally, there were lots of developments:

- The **US** rejoined the Paris Agreement and pledged to slash 2005 carbon emissions in half by 2030.
- Another big news item was **China's** decision that it would no longer support the construction of coal-fired power plants in other countries.
- The **EU** and the **US** pledged to cut global methane emissions 30% by 2030.
- The courts in **France** and **Germany** ordered their governments to ramp up their climate efforts in order to meet the Paris Agreement's goals.

Of course there were also setbacks, most notably Sen. Manchin's surprise decision to abandon negotiations over Biden's Build Back Better bill.

Who knows what the future will bring? If we've learned anything over the past five years, it's the peril of making predictions. What we *can* say is that 2021 turned out to be a very good year for the environment.