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Climate change

Gridlock in Washington imperils the US Paris climate targets

Commitments to reduce emissions in jeopardy after senator Joe Manchin scuppers crucial legislation



West Virginia senator Joe Manchin refused to back nearly \$300bn in tax incentives for clean energy as part of a flagship bill this summer © J Scott Applewhite/AP

Aime Williams in Washington 10 HOURS AGO

The US effort to reduce emissions in line with targets set by the Paris climate agreement is in jeopardy after Democratic senator Joe Manchin torpedoed ambitious new legislation on Capitol Hill, experts say.

While the country has committed to reduce its emissions by 50 to 52 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030, recent research by Rhodium Group shows that without further [policy](#) action, the US is on track for a reduction of just 24 to 35 per cent.

The refusal by Manchin, the centrist Democratic senator from coal-producing West Virginia, to back nearly \$300bn in tax incentives for clean energy as part of a [flagship bill](#) has dealt a significant blow to the US's effort to keep its promise, leaving president Joe Biden pledging to take executive action.

Ben King, an associate director at Rhodium's energy and [climate](#) practice, said it was "exceedingly difficult" for the administration to hit its commitments.

"Losing legislative action on the Hill represents a major step back, there is no denying that," he said.

Rhodium's analysis of the trajectory includes the effect of climate measures passed as part of the infrastructure bill earlier this year and of new federal rules on fuel economy standards for cars.

Alden Meyer, of climate advocacy group E3, said that even if states, cities, businesses and investors expanded their efforts “to get as close as possible to the US’s Paris commitments . . . it will not be sufficient to close the gap and meet the US 2030 [Paris target]”.

The Paris climate accord is a 2015 pact in which 189 countries agreed to limit global warming to below 2C, preferably to about 1.5C.

Failure to meet this commitment would harm America’s ability to persuade other countries to lower their own emissions, said Meyer. “The US is trying to press India, China and a number of other countries to raise their 2030 ambition — this is a pretty big blow to their leverage to do so,” he said.

Biden and the Democrats are eyeing more executive actions and regulatory moves as they try to make up the shortfall.

Jeff Merkley, the Democratic senator for Oregon, called on Biden to declare a national emergency and redirect spending to build renewable energy systems while using the Defense Production Act to funnel more money into renewable energy projects.

“For too long, we’ve been waiting on a single legislative package to save us and a single legislator to determine our fate,” said Merkley.

The president has already [invoked the Korean war-era Defense Production Act](#) to boost domestic supply of minerals crucial for electric vehicles and large-capacity batteries, and to boost the production of heat pumps, electric grid components, insulation and solar panels.

Under the terms of the DPA, an administration can compel companies to prioritise government contracts over private ones, for instance, or to provide loans and grants to boost manufacturing.

However, the money available from the DPA still needs congressional authorisation and amounts to far less than would have been made available by the dead bill.

“The thing about this bill is that it drove tens of billions of dollars into clean energy — instead of using regulations, it drove investment,” said Paul Bledsoe, a former White House climate adviser under Bill Clinton. “It’s something that’s very hard to replicate through regulations and executive orders.”

The failure to pass legislation also piles more pressure on the regulatory power of the

EPA, which was hamstrung by the Supreme Court earlier this month in a [ruling](#) that curbed the ability of the country's top environmental regulator to limit greenhouse gas emissions from power plants.

Climate advocates are nevertheless pushing the EPA to take the most stringent measures to regulate emissions from power plants and vehicles, although lawyers have said the Supreme Court ruling creates new uncertainty over what the EPA can achieve without facing further legal challenge.

Some climate advocates are calling for the administration to shut down the possibility of further oil and gas leasing.

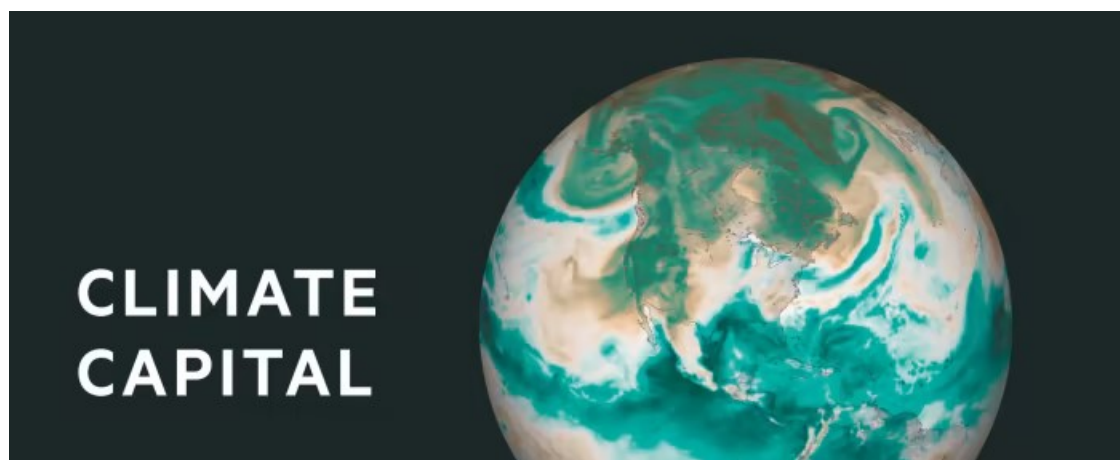
Earlier this month the White House signalled the possibility of selling new oil leases in offshore waters despite Biden's election campaign pledge to shut down drilling for fuels on federally owned territory.

His administration set out options for sales of leases to oil producers, including up to 10 auctions for rights in the Gulf of Mexico and another potential round of bidding off Alaska.

Blocking new leases in these areas would be a "serious statement from the president", said Zach Friedman, director of federal policy at Ceres, a group representing US companies and investors that has lobbied for clean energy regulation.

The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report on how to cut greenhouse gas emissions found that without immediate action, the world was on track for a 3.2C rise in temperatures by the end of the century. The definitive report compiled by 278 scientists and 195 countries is the final in a series of three over the past year.

Climate Capital





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