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Executive Director **Federal** Update –January/February 2021

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Big Renewables Buyers Call For Power Market Reforms

Arianna Skibell, E&E News reporter

Published: January 19, 2021

The expansion of competitive wholesale power markets is critical for enabling companies like Amazon.com Inc. and Apple Inc. to make bigger purchases of renewable energy, according to a new report by a group of corporate energy users.

With a day to go before President-elect Joe Biden ushers in a new energy agenda aimed at cutting carbon emissions, a coalition called the Advanced Energy Buyers Group pushed the idea that reforms to competitive wholesale markets are key for meeting corporate energy and sustainability goals.

Regional grid operators are overseen by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which analysts say could be a pivotal agency for advancing Biden's energy and climate agenda. Biden has called for 100% clean electricity by 2035.

There are currently seven U.S. regional operators serving New England, New York, Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states, Texas, and California. While large swaths of the country use more traditional wholesale electricity markets, primarily in the Southeast, Southwest and Northwest, about two-thirds of the nation's electricity load is served by an RTO, according to FERC.

The report calls for the expansion of competitive wholesale markets into Southwestern states like Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Nevada. Securing power through organized markets offers buyers more flexibility, transparency and competition, according to the group, as well as more options for purchasing wind and solar power and for energy storage.

It also recommended market design improvements the authors say will further low-carbon energy deployment.

More electric transmission is needed, the group noted, and regulators could simplify the often long and complicated process of connecting new power generation to the grid. Those improvements would facilitate more renewable energy purchases.

McMorris Rodgers Shakes Up Energy and Commerce

George Cahlink and Emma Dumain, E&E News January 22, 2021

Washington Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, the new top Republican on the Energy and Commerce Committee, is signaling a potentially more bipartisan and less ideological push on energy and environmental issues with her ranking member choices.

In her first moves, McMorris Rodgers kept Rep. Fred Upton (R-Mich.), a leading moderate, as ranking member of the Energy Subcommittee and named Rep. David McKinley (R-W.Va.), who has pushed his party to address climate change, as the new ranking member of the Environment and Climate Change Subcommittee.

And in an unexpected shake-up, McMorris Rodgers blocked Rep. Mike Burgess (R-Texas), a conservative doctor and lead critic of President Obama's health care plan, from remaining the top Republican on the Health Subcommittee.

Burgess, an ally of fossil fuel interests who lost to McMorris Rodgers to lead E&C Republicans in December, is furious.

According to a source familiar with internal party discussions, McMorris Rodgers, in winning the backing of party leaders for the job, argued that "it's been 10 years, and Americans still don't trust Republicans on health care." Her sentiment explains why she opted to replace the veteran Burgess with Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-Ky.).

With an eye toward winning back the House, aides said, McMorris Rodgers didn't only seek policy experts. She also chose people who will be compelling party spokespeople on some of the biggest issues of the moment, such as climate change and energy infrastructure.

New political landscape

McMorris Rodgers' decisions reflect the new political calculus for Republicans, with Democrats controlling both the White House and Capitol Hill.

The GOP will very likely still disagree with the Democrats' upcoming environmental push but can do so without appearing overtly hostile to addressing the climate crisis, which voters from both parties want tackled.

McMorris Rodgers campaigned for full committee ranking member by promising to use her skills as a messenger to make GOP policies more palatable to voters.

Biden Hands FERC Gavel to Richard Glick

Jeremy Dillon, E&E News reporter Published: January 21, 2021

President Biden appointed Democrat Richard Glick today to chair the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

Glick, who's been on the commission since 2017, is now leading a five-member panel that will tilt 2-3 for Republicans until at least June.

For most of the past two years, Glick has served as the lone dissenting voice to a series of fossil fuel infrastructure project approvals advanced by the Republicans. FERC's other Democrat is Commissioner Allison Clements, who was installed last month.

Glick is likely to place climate change and the energy sector's transition to a clean energy electric mix front and center into the commission's priorities, especially as it relates to greenhouse gas emission accounting and FERC's environmental review process.

Glick has expressed interest in revamping how FERC approaches transmission siting incentives and regulations. An improved transmission network could help bring on more renewable resources to the grid. He will also lead efforts on the commission about access for renewable resources to capacity markets under the "minimum offer price rule."

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Interior Boosts Authority for New Appointees

Michael Doyle and Jeremy P. Jacobs, E&E News reporters January 21, 2021

The Biden administration has temporarily beefed up the authority of some of its initial Interior Department appointees.

In a secretarial order issued yesterday, Interior bestowed on eight appointees the "decision-making authority associated with the duties and responsibilities" of presidentially appointed and Senate-confirmed (PAS) positions.

"The Department operates on a system of authority delegated from the Secretary to subordinate officials, with the presumption that authority will be delegated to the lowest appropriate level," the secretarial order notes.

The order added that it is "intended to ensure uninterrupted policy direction, management, decision-making, and execution of the duties of the vacant PAS positions during the Presidential transition, pending Senate confirmation of new non-career officials."

The new temporary leadership team, for instance, includes Tanya Trujillo to be assistant secretary for water and science (E&E News PM, Jan. 20).

Trujillo was a member of the transition team and has a long history on Western water issues, particularly the Colorado River. She is a New Mexico native and worked on those issues in the Interior Department during the Obama administration. Before that, she was a senior aide to former New Mexico Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D) and the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Before President Biden's inauguration, speculation among several Western water sources suggested Trujillo could become commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation in the Biden administration (Greenwire, Jan. 8).

That role, however, will be filled at least temporarily by Maria (Camille) Touton. Touton is a veteran of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, as well as the House and Senate natural resources panels. She also served as Interior's deputy assistant secretary for water and science during the Obama administration.

The other delegations are:

- Solicitor: Robert Anderson
- Assistant secretary for policy, management and budget: Rachael Taylor
- Assistant secretary for land and minerals management: Laura Daniel-Davis
- Assistant secretary for fish and wildlife and parks: Shannon Estenoz
- Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: Martha Williams
- Director, U.S. Geological Survey: David Applegate

Senate Commerce Committee Chairman, Buttigieg Support Advance Refunding Bonds

January 25, 2021 Paul Ciampoli

U.S. Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Roger Wicker, R-Miss., and Peter Buttigieg, who is President Joe Biden's nominee to serve as Secretary of Transportation, praised tax-exempt advance refunding bonds during Buttigieg's nomination hearing on Jan. 21.

Wicker noted that tax-exempt advance refunding bonds have historically been used to help state and local governments refinance debt at lower interest rates and asked the nominee "do you agree that they provide one more additional financing tool for state and local governments?"

Wicker noted that he and Senate Finance Committee member Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., intended to reintroduce S. 4129 from the 116th Congress that would reinstate the ability to issue tax-exempt advance refunding bonds with the hope of seeing it enacted. He also asked the nominee for his support.

The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 eliminated the ability to issue advance refunding bonds.

McConnell Relents On Filibuster, Paves Way For Power Sharing

George Cahlink and Manuel Quiñones, E&E News reporters January 26, 2021

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) dropped his demand that a power-sharing deal with Democrats include an assurance they wouldn't move to kill the legislative filibuster.

McConnell's decision, announced late last night, paves the way for both sides to enter an agreement that would allow the Senate to fully function.

McConnell pointed to promises from Sens. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.), who said they would not agree to scrap the filibuster. Without their support, Democrats wouldn't have enough support to change the rules.

Democrats and Republicans each have 50 members in their caucuses. Democrats hold the majority because Vice President Kamala Harris is able to break ties.

The power-sharing spat threatened to continue delaying President Biden's agenda, including confirming key nominees, especially with the impeachment trial looming.

The Senate has been able to confirm some of Biden's less controversial nominees, including Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen yesterday, even without a power-sharing accord in place.

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee will hold a confirmation hearing tomorrow for Energy secretary nominee Jennifer Granholm.

COVID-19

Meanwhile, a bipartisan call over the weekend between a bloc of 16 senators and Biden's National Economic Council Director Brian Deese found both parties eager to deliver more pandemic relief. However, the contours of legislation that can win bipartisan support remain unclear and might not be reachable.

"But experts and economists from the left to the right agree: Any further action should be smart and targeted, not just an imprecise deluge of borrowed money that would direct huge sums toward those who don't need it," he said.

McConnell has warned the White House's nearly \$2 trillion pandemic offering "misses the mark" with billions of dollars proposed for new state and local aid as well as a hike in the minimum wage.

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The Energy 202: Biden Under Pressure to Stop Utility Shutoffs During Pandemic

By Dino Grandoni January 26, 2021

He's been in office for less than a week, but President Biden is already facing calls to use his new power to prevent people from losing their electricity, gas or water.

Some of Biden's allies in Congress want the federal government to stop power companies, water providers and other utilities from shutting off service for failure to pay bills to help millions of Americans struggling during the pandemic.

Such a nationwide moratorium on utility shut-offs never came under former president Donald Trump. But its advocates say that it is just as necessary now as it was at the start of the coronavirus pandemic — and that either Congress or the White House needs to act.

The pressure comes after the Biden administration extending a nationwide freeze on evictions through March.

Biden could use that same authority to end utility shut-offs, according to a coalition of more than 600 racial justice, labor, environmental and religious organizations.

Those left-leaning groups are urging Biden to issue an executive order directing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to use the Public Health Service Act to prevent utilities from turning off the lights or stopping the tap, pointing to data from Duke University that local bans are linked with lower coronavirus case growth rates.

Another avenue would be for members of Congress to insert a shut-off ban in the next round of coronavirus stimulus.

House Democrats included such a moratorium in a \$3 trillion pandemic bill. The Senate's top Democrat, Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.), and Vice President Harris, when she was a senator from California, endorsed the measure, too. The broader bill died in the GOP-led Senate after a veto threat from Trump.

The Biden administration is pushing for more economic relief, but has not yet committed to stopping shut-offs.

The White House is proposing to spend \$5 billion to cover home energy and water costs, including unpaid bills, as part of its proposed \$1.9 trillion coronavirus package. The new administration also has \$25 billion in rental assistance in the latest coronavirus bill, passed in December, to distribute. Some of that can be used to cover utility costs.

Still, several Democratic senators are willing to see if they can get a ban passed in Congress, including through reconciliation.

But the idea of a nationwide ban have resistance from electric utilities that say the issue is better left up to state officials.

Americans around the country are racking up big unpaid utility bills.

That amount may outstrip the aid already set aside as part of the rental assistance money in December. The National Energy Assistance Directors' Association had projected electric and gas debts alone would reach or exceed \$24.3 billion by the end of last year.

Biden launches historic, government wide climate action

Scott Waldman, E&E News reporter January 27, 2021

President Biden raced toward fulfilling his gargantuan climate promises today with a sweeping effort to create clean energy jobs and begin phasing out fossil fuels one week into his presidency.

The executive orders signed by Biden this morning focus on helping front-line communities affected by pollution, address job losses in coal mining regions and bring climate science back to federal agencies after facing isolation during the Trump administration.

The moves mark Biden's first steps toward putting the nation on a path toward carbon neutrality by midcentury through a \$2 trillion plan that envisions a massive overhaul of the country's electricity and transportation sectors.

Today's effort is historic in size and speed, eclipsing the early climate policies advanced by the Obama White House more than a decade ago. It's also a whiplash moment in national politics, coming on the heels of the Trump administration's years long campaign to deconstruct federal rules designed to limit carbon emissions.

Biden's orders will impose a moratorium on new leasing for fossil fuel production on federal lands, establish climate change as a national security threat and stand up a White House task force to direct greenhouse gas reduction policies. It will also create an initiative called Justice40 to track and ensure that 40% of federal climate investments go to disadvantaged communities.

The U.S. will have its first Civilian Climate Corps focused on improving resiliency in communities across the country. And the actions today seek to conserve 30% of all federal land and water by 2030.

It will also ratify the Kigali Amendment to phase down hydrofluorocarbons, a potent greenhouse gas, and establish a scientific integrity policy to ensure government regulations are based on the best available science. It also reestablishes the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology.

The moves unveiled today, dubbed by the administration as "Climate Day," were met with enthusiasm by advocates, some of whom had criticized Biden's policies as too moderate during the presidential primary race.

Biden's actions will direct federal agencies to make clean energy investments in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color located near industrial pollution sites. It will create an environmental justice council based in the White House and establish offices devoted to protecting front-line communities at the Department of Justice and the Health and Human Services Department.

Despite the historical precedent of today's actions, they are not without risk. Executive actions are susceptible to reversal by future presidents.

They also mark the opening salvo of Biden's ambitious climate plan and alone are unlikely to result in large emissions reductions, according to experts.

Nevertheless, the actions will result in striking symbols of climate action, including a pause on oil and gas leasing. That could lead to policies by the Interior Department that disadvantage energy companies in the future, said Jesse Prentice-Dunn, policy director of the Center for Western Priorities.

The energy industry sought to portray the moves as a gift to foreign countries at the expense of U.S. jobs, and one that would weaken the fragile economy. American Petroleum Institute President Mike Sommers said the pause on oil and gas leasing on federal lands and waters was a troubling step toward a permanent ban.

In another dramatic shift from the last four years, the order will establish climate change as a national security threat. That's a return to the way it was viewed during the Obama administration.

Climate change is a national security issue that touches on extreme weather, the opening of the Arctic to shipping and instability of nations experiencing severe climate effects, said John Conger, director of the Center for Climate & Security and a former senior Department of Defense official in the Obama administration.

He said that it's important the Biden administration approaches climate and national security by connecting it to DOD, the Department of Homeland Security and the intelligence agencies.

The speed with which Biden is making moves on climate policy is unprecedented, even compared to the Obama administration, said John Morton, climate and energy director for the White House National Security Council in Obama's second term.

Biden's push to shift the U.S. toward clean energy and away from fossil fuels is happening in a different environment, where about 75% of the energy capacity added to the grid last year came from renewables, compared to about 10% when Obama took office.

"This train is moving faster than most people recognize, and the policy signals being sent are quite clear," said Morton, who is now a partner at climate investment firm Pollination. "The question is how quickly will markets respond, and I think the first signals are very convincing in that regard."

Unpaid Energy Bills Pile Up, Bringing Calls for Utility Debt Aid

By Rachel Cohen February 4, 2021

When the pandemic hit in March, as millions lost jobs and struggled to pay their bills, 34 states ordered mandatory moratoriums on utility shutoffs — measures that were all more critical as families were asked to stay home. The lockdowns translated into higher utility bills: One economist estimated that residential electricity use spiked 10% on average between April and July 2020, leading to households spending nearly \$6 billion on extra usage. Another home energy monitoring company reported that April demand increased 22% from 2019.

Yet despite the need never dissipating, most states eventually lifted their utility shutoff moratoriums; by the end of October, just 16 states and Washington, D.C., had active moratoriums in place, covering 40 percent of the U.S. population, according to the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association. Other states regularly halt utility shutoffs in winter, or when the temperature reaches a particularly cold level. NEADA estimates that 13 states are now relying primarily on these annual seasonal respites.

Even in households that still have their heat on and water running, millions of customers are racking up significant debts as unpaid bills mount. And advocates worry that shutoffs, like evictions, are just being kicked down the road.

A new economics working paper from Duke University released last week underscored the public health dimension of their concerns: Researchers estimated that, had Congress implemented a nationwide moratorium on utility shutoffs between March and November, Covid-19 infections could have been reduced by 8.7%, and Covid-19 related-deaths by almost 15%. The patchwork of shutoff moratoriums that did exist during that time, the economists found, reduced infections by nearly 4%, and mortality rates by 7.4% by making it easier for people to shelter at home. Without water or electricity, households can be forced to stay with relatives or other families, exacerbating crowding and disease transmission. “Ensuring that people have access to housing and essential services for water and electricity within their housing is necessary in any adequate government response to the housing precarity created by the COVID-19 pandemic,” the researchers wrote.

On Jan. 13, more than 600 organizations sent President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris a letter urging them to authorize a nationwide shutoff moratorium on water, electricity, broadband, and heat. Such a national ban on utility shutoffs was included in both versions of the House Democrats' HEROES Act, which passed in May and October. But despite authorizing a national eviction moratorium on his first day in office, Biden has so far resisted calls to extend the ban to utilities: Instead, he's asked Congress to authorize another round of stimulus relief, with \$25 billion in rental assistance and \$5 billion for energy and water assistance.

Utility companies have been unenthusiastic about shutoff moratoriums. In the Washington Post last week, Adam Benschhoff, vice president for regulatory affairs at the Edison Electric Institute, which represents investor-owned electric utilities, said that “customers with unpaid bills will not work with their electric companies on a payment plan until they receive a disconnection warning.” (EEI did not respond to CityLab's request for comment.)

NEADA executive director Mark Wolfe told CityLab that while Biden's proposal would surely help, they are concerned that the \$25 billion in funding for renters will do little for homeowners who are behind on their bills. “We are also concerned that local agencies that will be charged with administering the funds might not have the resources to coordinate the payment of rent and utility, and as result only rental bills will get paid,” he said.

Different estimates of outstanding debt abound. Wolfe estimates between 9 million and 12 million households have unpaid bills, with those households being on average \$6,500 behind on rent and utilities. A Moody's Analytics report released in January estimated Americans' back rent stood at \$57 billion. Chief economist Mark Zandi said the average "delinquent renter" will owe \$5,600, as they'll be almost four months behind on monthly rent of \$1,130 and utilities of \$290.

For now, cities have been trying to leverage federal stimulus money by establishing emergency funds for residents.

Clear data can be hard to come by. Civil rights groups like the NAACP have long called for federal reporting requirements on utilities, but most states do not require electric or gas providers to disclose how customers are accessing or retaining services, and utility companies have historically fought efforts to publish the information, aware of the public relations fallout that disclosing shutoffs could bring. In a report published in August, Michael Thomas, founder of the energy-efficiency startup Carbon Switch, mined data from state websites on expiring utility moratoriums to find that 34.5 million households would lose shut-off protections in the next month, leaving 9.5 million unemployed people at risk by Oct. 1. In a second report from October, he found that four states did let their moratoriums expire in September, affecting 16 million households, with 2.3 million of those below the poverty line before the pandemic started.

Charlie Harak, a senior attorney for energy and utilities issues at the National Consumer Law Center, says it's also impossible for advocates like him to know exactly how many homeowners are behind on their utilities because companies don't disclose arrearages by homeowners versus renters. Harak is based in Massachusetts, which has better reporting requirements than most other states. As of November, he says, 500,000 residential customers in his state were more than 90 days in arrear, owing an average of \$1,000. "When our state moratorium ends, that's a big number," he said. "These families are at high risk of being terminated."

Harak has been working to figure out how much money would be needed nationwide to address the outstanding utility debt, largely by extrapolating from Massachusetts's data. "If you're trying to pay down 100% of the arrearages — which is a better situation than pre-Covid, or if you're trying to pay down the percentage needed so people don't get shut-off, I think it's reasonable to assume the number is between \$10 billion and \$30 billion, and that's not including money for broadband or water."

For now, cities have been trying to leverage federal stimulus money by establishing emergency funds for residents. In Columbus, Ohio, for example, the city awarded grants of up to \$750 for water bills, and up to \$500 for power bills. In Henderson, Nevada, residents could apply for aid up to \$1,000 for utilities, and up to \$360 for internet.

In December NEADA and 31 other groups representing state and local energy organizations sent a letter to congressional leaders asking for an additional \$10 billion allocated to the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) to help up to 7 million families pay off their utility debt. Prior to Covid-19, they noted, approximately 26 million households were eligible for low-income fuel assistance. NEADA projected in December that an additional 5 million households would be eligible for LIHEAP "as a direct result of virus-related layoffs."

Bolstering money to LIHEAP, the energy groups said, is better than the alternatives, where utilities could offer repayment plans, but those could take households years to pay off, and slow families from

getting back on their feet. Alternatively, utilities could raise rates on all their customers to cover the arrearages, which also would mean further strain on households after the pandemic.

On Jan. 28, Democratic representatives Annie Kuster and Peter Welch responded to that call, introducing the Energy Debt Relief for American Families Act, focused exclusively on trying to help families bring down their utility arrearages. The bill would likely not cover the full scope of need, but would provide \$10 billion to states to pay off debts through LIHEAP. (Up to 15% percent of those funds could be spent on administrative purposes, like contacting eligible families to make sure they know relief is available.)

As the pandemic stretches deeper into winter, advocates haven't given up hope of a national shutoff ban, and the new Democratic majority in the Senate gives them the ability to get it through a budget reconciliation process. The timing might be right, especially when paired with momentum for an eviction ban. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer endorsed the utility shutoff measure last year, as did Harris, before joining the White House. Senator Jeff Merkley, who introduced the Emergency Water and Energy is a Human Right Act in July, told the Washington Post he wants the president and his colleagues "to use every available tool at our disposal to put in place a national disconnection moratorium."

Senate adopts blueprint for stimulus as Harris breaks tie

By Steven T. Dennis, Daniel Flatley and Erik Wasson February 5, 2021

The Senate voted 51-50, after Vice President Kamala Harris broke her first tie, to adopt a budget blueprint for President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion virus relief package -- following nearly 15 hours of wading through amendments from both parties.

The House had already adopted its budget resolution but will likely have to vote again Friday to agree on the Senate's language. Once that's done, Democrats will be able to craft a relief bill in the coming weeks that can pass without any Republican votes under special budget rules — though the White House, moderates like Democratic Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia and others still say they want a bipartisan final product.

House and Senate committees would have until Feb. 16 to write the stimulus legislation under the instructions in the budget.

The final action early Friday followed an all-night marathon of votes on amendments known as a vote-a-rama. Most of the non-binding measures were intended more to make points on hot-button issues like taxes, abortion, immigration and schools that had little or sometimes nothing to do with pandemic aid. There were 41 roll call votes during the process.

Democrats mostly held together to beat back the Republican amendments, but on several issues centrist Democrats displayed their clout in the 50-50 Senate and delivered a message to Biden and progressives that they won't get everything on their wish list.

Democrats did have a series of defections on energy-related amendments, though none supported a proposal aimed at barring a federal carbon tax. That amendment, offered by Republican John Hoeven of North Dakota, failed on a 50-50 vote. Seven Democrats voted to oppose a ban on fracking and two opposed Biden's decision to cancel the Keystone XL pipeline — potential warning signs as Democrats prepare a package on climate change legislation.

The Senate agreed to amendments against a near-term increase in the minimum wage during the pandemic and against stimulus checks for “upper income” individuals. While non-binding, these could prefigure a delay in the wage phase in or a tighter cap in who gets checks.

The latter amendment, a bipartisan proposal from Manchin and Susan Collins, a Maine Republican, sought to prevent upper-income people from receiving government stimulus payments. They argued it didn’t make sense for \$1,400 checks to go to wealthier families, though their amendment didn’t specify a particular income level. It passed 99-1, with only Kentucky Republican Rand Paul in opposition.

The adoption of the budget, assured by the presence of Harris, marked the clearest sign yet of the of the Democratic takeover of the Senate, even if it’s by the slimmest margin. No Republican has yet backed anything close to the \$1.9 trillion sought by Biden, with many in the GOP pivoting to austerity politics as they did in 2009 with a Democrat sitting in the Oval Office.

Republicans complained Biden was taking a partisan stance while spurning a \$600 billion offer from 10 of their senators.

Democrats held firm against efforts to tie school funding to reopening schools, arguing the whole point of the money is to help schools safely reopen in the first 100 days of Biden’s presidency.

The non-binding amendments can set the stage for follow-on action — or campaign ads against senators in future elections.

One immigration amendment by Ted Cruz split the GOP, with 60 senators blocking his proposal opposing an expansion of work-related visas until the economy fully recovers. That could signal a slim possibility of reaching a bipartisan immigration deal later this year — a major Biden priority.

Just before final adoption, the Senate stripped out three amendments -- on the Keystone pipeline, fracking and banning stimulus checks for undocumented immigrants. Those measures could have caused the budget to lose votes in the House.

Lawmakers clustered in tight groups on the Senate floor as they talked and debated policy. It was a scene reminiscent of last year’s impeachment trial of then-President Donald Trump and one that foreshadowed his second trial, set to begin in less than a week.

The pandemic that has continued to rage around the country seemed an afterthought but for the masks that all but one of 100 senators wore. The exception was Paul.

Some of the senators on the floor were experiencing their first vote-a-rama after taking office this year: Bill Hagerty of Tennessee, John Hickenlooper of Colorado, Mark Kelly of Arizona, Ben Ray Lujan of New Mexico, Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming, Roger Marshall of Kentucky, Alex Padilla of California, Tommy Tuberville of Alabama and Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock of Georgia.

Democrats are already planning another budget reconciliation package later this year for other items, including on climate legislation.

Biden Recommits US To Paris Climate Accord

By Rebecca Beitsch 01/20/21

President Biden on Wednesday took action to have the U.S. rejoin the Paris climate accord, following through on a campaign pledge to recommit to the Obama-era agreement on his first day in office.

The move reverses former President Trump's withdrawal from the pact. For several months, the U.S. was the only country in the world that wasn't a party to the accord.

Biden has described the renewed commitment as a down payment on his climate plan, which calls for putting the country on a path to net-zero emissions by 2050.

Rejoining takes little more than a letter from Biden, but the U.S. will be recommitting to the Paris agreement at a time when other countries have begun rolling out more ambitious climate goals.

Special envoy John Kerry will be leading much of the administration's efforts, shepherding the U.S. through a United Nations conference set for November in Scotland, where countries will formally adopt more stringent climate commitments.

Ahead of the U.N. meeting, both the United Kingdom and the European Union have committed to reducing their emissions by 68 percent and 40 percent, respectively, below 1990 levels by 2030. The U.S. has not upped its commitments under the accord since former President Obama entered it in 2016.

Kerry has said reestablishing American leadership on climate change will be one of his top priorities.

Biden Plan to Electrify Federal Fleet Will Boost EV Market, But Many Questions Remain, Experts Say

Robert Walton@TeamWetDog Jan. 27, 2021

President Joe Biden on Monday called to transition the federal government's vehicle fleet to all-electric and American-made, spurring optimism within the electric vehicle (EV) sector for increased adoption of emissions-free cars.

As part of an executive order announced on Wednesday, Biden directed "federal agencies to procure carbon pollution-free electricity and clean, zero-emission vehicles to create good-paying, union jobs and stimulate clean energy industries."

There were about 645,000 vehicles in the federal fleet in 2019, according to the General Services Administration. Electrifying all of them could take a decade or more, according to experts, and that process will help bring stability to the burgeoning EV marketplace.

The federal government embracing EVs could help speed broader adoption among consumers, experts say.

Schumer Taps Sanders To Head Finance, Manchin To Lead Energy

By Ebony Bowden February 2, 2021 | Updated

WASHINGTON — Sen. Bernie Sanders has been elevated to the powerful role of Senate Budget Committee Chairman as the Democratic Party continues its metamorphosis under the new Biden administration.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Tuesday announced the committee memberships for the new 117th Congress and also confirmed that West Virginia centrist Sen. Joe Manchin, who is quickly emerging as a powerful voice in the upper chamber, would lead the Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee.

After damaging allegations about her flagging mental acuity emerged in the press late last year, 87-year-old Sen. Dianne Feinstein also stepped aside and has been replaced as the chair of the powerful Senate Judiciary Committee by Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin.

Manchin and Sanders both served as the minority leaders on their respective committees but were elevated to the chairmanships after Republicans lost the Senate majority earlier this year.

As chair of the budget committee, Sanders, an independent senator from Vermont who caucuses with Democrats, will be in charge of shepherding Biden's plans for tax reform through a narrowly-divided Congress.

Meanwhile, Manchin will serve a unique role on the energy and natural resources committee as the senator from coal-rich West Virginia.

The Democrat lawmaker has embraced Biden's goal of net zero emissions by 2050, but has pushed back on progressives' calls to eliminate the nation's use of fossil fuels.

Biden Climate Actions To Jolt Electricity Prices

By Jonathan Garber FOXBusiness

Electricity prices are set to “skyrocket” as President Biden steers the U.S. economy toward a green-energy agenda, according to experts.

Biden has pledged to achieve a net-zero electricity grid by 2035 and a net-zero economy by 2050.

Solar and wind make up a respective 1% and 3% of all U.S. energy, according to a report published last month by the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Coal, petroleum, and natural gas account for a combined 79% of U.S. energy.

Biden's new energy and climate plans are designed to “get coal-fired and natural gas-fired electricity prices high enough that then solar and wind become competitive,” said Gregory Wrightstone, executive director of the CO2 Coalition, which seeks to educate the public about the important contributions carbon dioxide makes to our lives and the economy.

The shale revolution and fracking have caused natural gas prices to plummet over the past decade. Prices were projected to be over \$20 per one thousand cubic feet, and instead are today under \$2. Coal prices are also declining.

But electricity prices are already going up because of the "wasteful, duplicative solar and wind on our grid," said Alex Epstein, founder and president of the Center for Industrial Progress, a for-profit think-tank seeking to bring a new industrial revolution.

Because solar and wind are unreliable energy sources and don't replace power plants on the grid, their costs are not replacement costs and are instead additional costs. Mining for materials and solar panels requires oil and forging the different components of solar panels and wind turbines use coal.

Tens of millions of Americans live in energy poverty, experiencing hardship to pay for basic energy needs. Twenty-five million Americans say they have forgone food or medicine to pay for electricity and 10 million say they've kept their home at an unsafe temperature.

The U.S. isn't the first developed nation to attempt a transformation into a renewable-energy based economy.

Germany began its shift to renewables in 2000 and in 2019 it produced 515.6 terawatt-hours of power with 46% coming from solar, wind, biomass and hydroelectric generation. Germany aims for renewables to account for 65% of total energy production by 2030.

Electricity prices in Germany "have doubled just to get to thirty-three percent solar and wind, and they're having all sorts of issues," Epstein said.

Implementing Biden's \$2 trillion climate plan will take time and money and the results may not result in the desired outcome. The president has already signed a flurry of executive orders aimed at transitioning the U.S. economy away from its reliance on fossil fuels toward cleaner, renewable energy sources like solar and wind.

Those orders include a temporary ban on new permits and leases for drilling on federal lands and waters, revoking the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline and reentering the U.S. into the 2016 Paris climate agreement, paving the way for a "clean energy revolution."

The administration's "Climate Czar" -- John Kerry -- last month acknowledged that Biden's agenda wouldn't have the desired impact in the global climate fight.

The U.S. was the world's second-largest CO2 emitter last year, accounting for 15% of total emissions, according to Earth Systems Science Data.

U.S. energy-related CO2 emissions have since 2007 declined eight of the past 12 years, falling from 119 million metric tons to 102 million metric tons, the U.S. Energy Information Administration said.

While emissions are falling in the U.S., the trend, barring the 2020 impact of COVID-19 lockdowns, is higher in China and India, the world's largest and third-largest emitters which account for 28% and 7%, respectively, of the world's total.

Emissions from the world's biggest emitters were down across the board – falling 2% in the US, 11% in the EU, 9% in India, and 1.7% in China.

While Wrightstone believes the decline in carbon emissions is "significant," he notes there was no drop in the levels of atmospheric CO2.

Carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution have risen from 280 parts per million to more than 400 parts per million today. They continue to rise.

Wrightstone says the theory behind Biden's climate plan is that a carbon taxation scheme and the regulation of the oil, gas and coal industries out of existence would lower CO2 emissions, resulting in reduced greenhouse gas warming from CO2.

The problem, he says, is that there has been no evidence of "any atmospheric CO2 levels being reduced."

There's "no doubt we're in a warming trend" that started 300 years ago, said Wrightstone, who believes modest warming and increasing levels of CO2 benefit Earth's ecosystems and humanity.

"Those natural forces that cause temperature to rise for the first two hundred and fifty years did not suddenly cease in the middle of the 20th century," he added. "Whatever this plan is and there's really no evidence that it will do anything to help."

Arizona Bills Threaten 'Showdown' Over 100% Clean Energy Rules

Regulators were expected to move forward with a carbon-free requirement for investor-owned utilities. New legislation questions their authority to do so.

Emma Foehringer Merchant February 08, 2021

A spate of bills making their way through the Republican-controlled Arizona legislature — some on a fast track — could undercut the 100 percent clean energy targets the state's utility regulators are soon expected to finalize.

The four bills come just as the Arizona Corporation Commission (ACC) has reached the final stretch of a years-long process to develop rules that would hold the state's largest utilities to a carbon-free electricity mandate by 2050. Regulators voted in November to move forward with the rules, though the commission is required to vote again in the next few months for them to be finalized.

If approved, the regulations would require Arizona's investor-owned utilities to entirely excise fossil fuels from their portfolios by midcentury while meeting interim targets in the meantime. The state would join numerous peers, including neighboring California and Nevada, working to meet all of their electricity needs with clean resources in the coming decades. Arizona Public Service, the state's largest utility, has already established a voluntary commitment to the carbon-free target.

But recently introduced legislation could upend that process. A pair of mirror bills (meaning that the same language was introduced in the House and Senate) would disallow the commission from adopting or enforcing any policy regulating the types of generation that utilities in the state must use. Instead, the bills argue that that authority lies with the legislature.

Another bill, written by newly elected Republican Representative Jacqueline Parker, would allow the attorney general to investigate any commission order or rule that a legislator alleges is outside the commission's authority. Parker previously worked as a legal aide to Commissioner Justin Olson, who was the sole "no" in the ACC's latest vote on the energy rules.

Taken together, the proposals have launched a statewide debate about the commission's constitutional authority to establish rules on clean energy. Most states that have pursued such goals have done so

through legislation. In others, governors have set out policy roadmaps to reach higher percentages of clean energy.

Republican Gov. Doug Ducey has also signaled support for keeping the commission focused on ratemaking rather than energy policy.

Nonetheless, consideration of the bills may have a chilling effect on the commission's rulemaking. If the bills pass, they could cause a "showdown" in front of the Supreme Court to determine where the legislature's authority ends and that of the commission begins, said Adam Stafford, an attorney with the clean energy program at Western Resource Advocates, a nonprofit conservation group that opposes the bills.

The legislation could also deter certain commissioners from advancing energy rulemaking. The commission voted in January to take a neutral stance on the legislation that would limit its power.