



President Biden’s ‘Whole of Government’ Climate Spending Extravaganza

Eric Felten

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Just two years ago, the National Endowment for the Arts made only one grant to an art project that promised to address the issue of climate change, awarding \$25,000 to the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art to commission work informed by “research on the Earth’s dissolving permafrost layer.”

During the last two years, the federal agency has provided \$1,369,000 to fund some 40 climate-focused projects. The 29 such grants approved for fiscal year 2022 include support for multidisciplinary artist Hajra Waheed’s collaboration “with researchers and organizers on issues such as land sovereignty and food and climate justice”; development of a Baltimore Center Stage production titled, “A Play for the Living in a Time of Extinction”; and a grant to the Dance Exchange in Takoma Park, Maryland, to use “movement and storytelling to explore the ways different landscapes and communities are navigating climate change.”

Never mind the prospect of reins on executive climate action in light of the Supreme Court’s stinging regulatory rebuke last month: These art projects are one small piece of an explosion of climate spending since President Biden called during his first days in office for a “whole-of-government approach to combating the climate crisis.” In response, every department, bureau, and agency has climate-related budget lines, responding to Biden’s mandate by claiming a slice of the climate pie.

Where the Trump administration’s 150-page budget overview for the fiscal year 2020 mentioned the word climate just once (and that was a reference to “school climate”—that is, educational environment), the current White House 2023 budget overview mentions the word “climate” 187 times and the phrase “climate crisis” 33 times in its 158 pages.

The administration’s proposed budget for fiscal year 2023 calls for “a total of \$44.9 billion to tackle the climate crisis,” \$16.7 billion more than climate spending in 2021, according to the president’s budget.

“Climate change is not only a real and growing threat,” Sen. Gary Peters of Michigan said, “but it also presents an economic opportunity.” These include:

- The Department of Health and Human Services plans to boost spending on the CDC’s Climate and Health Program from \$10 million to \$110 million, to “identify potential health effects associated with climate change and implement health adaptation plans.”
- The National Institutes of Health are ramping up research on “climate change impact on health,” with grants for projects “that address the impact of climate change on health” and technologies for measuring “the effects of climate change and extreme weather events on human health.”
- Even as it struggles with the growing crisis on the southern border, the Department of Homeland Security in its 2023 fiscal year budget asks for \$55 million to battle climate change. Of that, \$2 million will be spent “to stand up a Climate Change Program Management Office,” and \$4 million will go to the bureaucratic activities of “tracking, monitoring, and auditing ... environmental planning compliance actions.” DHS is also committed to electrifying half its fleet of motor vehicles by the end of the decade.
- The State Department is seeking \$2.3 billion for a broad range of climate-related expenditures including \$2 million on “support for post-led climate diplomacy”; \$7 million for “global climate diplomacy”; \$2.6 million for the “Climate Change Public Diplomacy Fund”; \$7.9 million for the “Center of Climate and Sustainability”; \$17 million for “Overseas Climate Resilience, Building Energy, and Sustainability Projects”; and over \$16 million to support the “Special Presidential Envoy for Climate”—aka John Kerry currently. State is also seeking \$5 million to buy or lease electric vehicles for the department.

Linda J. Bilmes, a professor at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government who studies the federal budget, says that the Biden administration is “trying to send a message that in everything we do, we should be attentive to the issue.” Part of “the problem of dealing with an issue so big,” Bilmes added, “is that responsibility is so fragmented.”

Increased funding to protect coastlines, inspect wind turbines and solar farms, and promote the use of carbon-free energy sources directly align with Biden’s call to address what he calls the “existential threat” of climate change. But there are other organizing principles—reflecting progressive concerns—that inform the budget requests. Chief among these is Biden’s belief that climate should be addressed across the government as an issue of “environmental justice.” The NIH supports that agenda, stating that “Research has shown the impact of climate change differs across populations depending on socioeconomic advantages.”

The Department of Housing and Urban Development plans to spend over \$1 billion in “climate resilience and energy efficiency improvements.” For example, HUD promises to advance “climate resilience and environmental justice by redeveloping and replacing distressed public and multifamily housing and neighborhood amenities with resilient and energy-efficient

structures.” It might be pointed out, however, that one of HUD’s main responsibilities is to redevelop distressed public housing. Is HUD’s commitment to confronting the threat of climate change a new imperative, or just a new way to justify the department and its activities?

The Environmental Protection Agency is also pursuing environmental justice. Under EPA’s new strategic plan, the top goal is to “Tackle the Climate Crisis.” Following a close second is Goal 2, which commits the EPA to “Take Decisive Action to Advance Environmental Justice and Civil Rights.” In practice that means embedding environmental justice into all of the agency’s “Programs Policies and Activities.”

It isn’t clear, however, whether the EPA will be able to re-invent itself as a ministry of environmental justice, given the Supreme Court’s recent consequential decision limiting what powers the agency can exercise without explicit authorization by Congress.

The Court’s ruling in *West Virginia v. Environmental Protection Agency*, with its requirements that regulators stick to their lanes, may also put the brakes on President Biden’s efforts to turn *every* department and agency into climate police.

At least for now, the Department of Justice is committed to “environmental justice” too. Don’t confuse the new effort with the old. The Environment and Natural Resources Division at DOJ has been enforcing federal environmental laws for more than a century. Attorney General Merrick Garland announced in May a new DOJ Office of Environmental Justice. “Although violations of our environmental laws can happen anywhere, communities of color, indigenous communities, and low-income communities often bear the brunt of the harm caused by environmental crime, pollution, and climate change,” he said.

The Army Corps of Engineers is tasked with advancing environment justice, as is the Department of Energy. DOE recently awarded \$3.6 million in cash prizes to fund “Climate solutions for underrepresented communities.” Climate change isn’t just a crisis, it is a crisis that demands redistribution, which in turn calls for greater intervention by the federal government. The prizes involved various offices and entities within Energy—the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, the Office of Economic Impact and Diversity, and the Office of Technology Transitions.

In response to the president’s call for “climate adaptation plans” across the government, the Department of Education came up with a “Green Ribbon Schools” award for institutions that “teach effective environmental and sustainability education.” This year’s Green Ribbon School winners were announced in April. One awardee was Escuela Verde in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a public charter school devoted to “ecopedagogy.” The Department of Education celebrates the “school’s emphasis on food and food justice” which “has led to an entirely vegetarian school lunch.”

“I’ve seen this before,” says Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute. “When an issue gets hot, every federal agency knows they can maximize their budget by tailoring their programs and messaging around the hot theme.”

Among the topics that have been used to justify spending are everything from rural broadband to gender and structural racism. “Even the Department of Transportation is receiving money to deal with past racial discrimination related to the Interstate Highway System.”

The sweeping agenda has also inspired projects that tap into New Deal nostalgia. With overtones of the Great Depression program to put young, unemployed men to work on public lands—the Civilian Conservation Corps—the Department of the Interior proposes to launch a new Civilian Climate Corps. And Interior is hardly the only department getting into that action: The Department of Labor proposes spending \$10 million “to partner with AmeriCorps and other agencies to establish a Civilian Climate Corps.” Among those agencies is the department’s Employment and Training Administration.

Kate DeAngelis, international finance program manager for Friends of the Earth, says she is pleased with the Biden administration’s whole-of-government approach. She’d actually like to see even more of it. “Unfortunately,” she says, “not every agency is doing its fair share to combat climate change.” DeAngelis’ complaint is that agencies such as the U.S. Export-Import Bank and the U.S. International Development Corporation continue to support fossil fuel projects around the world, “despite the devastating impacts it will have on the climate.”

Still, some agencies appear to be hard-pressed to find a slice of the climate pie they can call their own.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is promoting new building codes, calling for research on “the impacts of climate change” to shape those codes. (One easy approach might simply be for state and local governments to deny permits for oceanside high-rises built on sand.) FEMA shows how departments and agencies have been using the specter of a climate crisis to build political support for government actions. One of FEMA’s main goals is to “Drive public action on building codes,” an effort spurred by using “climate science messaging to increase public demand for building codes and standards.”

Agencies few Americans have ever heard of are trying to get in on the action. Among the environmental initiatives being promoted at the Department of the Treasury are those found at the office of the Inspector General for Tax Administration, or TIGTA. With a proposed budget for the 2023 fiscal year of \$182 million, TIGTA has many responsibilities. It is tasked with protecting taxpayer information, improving tax compliance, and overseeing Internal Revenue Service “efforts to implement tax law changes.” The tax IG investigates scams targeting the elderly; prosecutes cyber criminals who attack IRS web sites; and improves “the integrity of IRS operations by detecting and deterring waste, fraud, abuse, and misconduct.”

Treasury promises that in its audits and investigations TIGTA will support the department's strategic goals. Among them, "Combat Climate Change." But how? TIGTA points to its fleet of 200 vehicles and promises to replace them with electric vehicles.

But that may be easier said than done. Plans to replace government cars and trucks with electrics, whether at TIGTA, Homeland Security, or the State Department, "are not to be taken seriously," says Benjamin Zycher, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Eliminate every vehicle used by the federal government and the effect on the climate—even under the worst-case scenario calculations—would be vanishingly small. Even if one were to eliminate the auto emissions of the entire federal government, the change in expected global temperatures would be "essentially zero."

Professor Bilmes says that energy efficiencies are important across the federal government, and particularly at the Department of Defense, given that DOD "is the world's single largest purchaser of fuel and vehicles."

"We spend so much money on government," says Bilmes, "that government should be in the vanguard of being energy efficient."