

Obama's new climate plan relies on unilateral executive power

By: Michael Bastasch – June 25, 2013

Under pressure from environmentalists, President Barack Obama's new plan to tackle global warming relies on executive power to corral power plants.

The president calls for the Environmental Protection Agency to "expeditiously" set limits on carbon dioxide emissions for new and existing power plants, a move that will be hailed by environmentalists and decried as debilitating by the struggling coal industry.

"To accomplish these goals, President Obama is issuing a Presidential Memorandum directing the Environmental Protection Agency to work expeditiously to complete carbon pollution standards for both new and existing power plants," states the Obama plan. "This work will build on the successful first-term effort to develop greenhouse gas and fuel economy standards for cars and trucks."

"In developing the standards, the President has asked the Environmental Protection Agency to build on state leadership, provide flexibility, and take advantage of a wide range of energy sources and technologies including many actions in this plan," the document continues.

Regulations previously proposed by the EPA to limit emissions at new power plants would effectively ban the construction of new coal-fired power plants unless they utilize carbon capture technology, which the industry argues is not commercially viable.

"We do not believe EPA regulations are an effective way to address concerns about global climate change," said Mike Duncan, president of the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity. "If the government creates standards that are not practical, they risk not just shutting down existing plants but also halting the development of additional clean coal technology facilities. Taking America's most significant source of electricity offline would have disastrous consequences for our nation's economy."

Earlier this year, the EPA missed its deadline to finalize a rule limiting emissions from new power plants. Environmental groups and several states responded by threatening to sue to force the agency to implement the rule. The lawsuit was shelved pending the president's new climate plan.

"Combating climate change means curbing carbon pollution — for the first time ever — from the biggest single source of such dangerous gases: our coal-fired power plants," said

Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council. “We stand ready to help President Obama in every way we can.”

The EPA has also already indicated that emission limits for existing power plants are ahead.

Acting EPA administrator Bob Perciasepe told reporters that the agency looks forward to “working with states on existing sources, but we’re not there yet. But that’s certainly something that will be on the table in this next fiscal year.”

The president’s climate plan has three main area of focus: reducing U.S. carbon emissions, taking the lead on a global climate agreement and preparing the U.S. for the effects of global warming.

“While no single step can reverse the effects of climate change, we have a moral obligation to future generations to leave them a planet that is not polluted and damaged,” reads Obama’s plan. “Through steady, responsible action to cut carbon pollution, we can protect our children’s health and begin to slow the effects of climate change so that we leave behind a cleaner, more stable environment.”

This includes directing the Interior Department to permit more green energy projects on public lands by 2020 to power more than 6 million homes, assistance for energy efficiency in commercial and industrial buildings and developing fuel economy standards for heavy-duty vehicles.

The plan would also direct federal agencies to support “climate-resilient’ investments on the local level and commits the U.S. to expanding and entering into new international agreements to curb emissions.

The administration’s plan, however, did not address the issue approving the Keystone XL pipeline, a hot-button issue among environmentalists.

Obama’s announcement comes at a time when cracks are starting to show in the science surrounding global warming, as global temperatures stopped rising about 15 years ago.

“The divergence of the real world observations from the multi-decadal climate predictions, both in terms of forecasting the magnitude of global warming and of changes in regional climate, is finally initiating a much overdue scientific debate on the level of our knowledge of the climate system,” said Roger Pielke, Sr., senior research scientist at CIRES at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

The United Nations’ climate authority predicted that global temperatures would rise between 1 degree Celsius and 3 degrees Celsius in the short term, but UK scientists have reported that global temperatures will only rise between 0.9 degrees Celsius and 2.0 degrees Celsius — echoing a finding by Norwegian scientists that temperatures would only rise 1.9 degrees Celsius

Patrick Michaels of the libertarian Cato Institute noted many studies have lowered warming estimates:

“Richard Lindzen gives a range of 0.6 to 1.0 C (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Atmospheric Sciences*, 2011); Andreas Schmittner, 1.4 to 2.8 C (*Science*, 2011); James Annan, using two techniques, 1.2 to 3.6 C and 1.3 to 4.2 C (*Climatic Change*, 2011); J.H. van Hateren, 1.5 to 2.5 C (*Climate Dynamics*, 2012); Michael Ring, 1.5 to 2.0 C (*Atmospheric and Climate Sciences*, 2012); and Julia Hargreaves, including cooling from dust, 0.2 to 4.0 C and 0.8 to 3.6 C (*Geophysical Research Letters*, 2012).”

“There are two conceivable explanations — and neither is very pleasant for us,” meteorologist Hans von Storch told the German publication *Der Spiegel*. “The first possibility is that less global warming is occurring than expected because greenhouse gases, especially CO₂, have less of an effect than we have assumed. This wouldn’t mean that there is no man-made greenhouse effect, but simply that our effect on climate events is not as great as we have believed.”

“The other possibility is that, in our simulations, we have underestimated how much the climate fluctuates owing to natural causes,” Storch added.