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Congress thwarted Obama on climate change goals

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Candidate Barack Obama dared Americans to mark the day he accepted the 2008 Democratic nomination as “the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal.”

Two terms later, the oceans are still rising, and our planet is still ailing with drought and ferocious storms.

After promising to deliver sweeping changes, Obama’s legacy on climate change can be drilled down to two words: He tried.

Obama’s long-term agenda fell short of ambitious campaign goals, and what he did accomplish may be quickly undone by the Donald Trump administration.

As president, Obama summoned world leaders, the power of the bully pulpit, regulatory tools and market forces to do something — anything — about climate change.

He found support for key legislation to control greenhouse gas emissions, only to see it perish in the Senate.

He provided billions in federal funding to jumpstart America’s renewables and raise fuel standards, while simultaneously increasing domestic oil and gas production to help lower prices at the pump.

He negotiated a major international climate deal and gave the Environmental Protection Agency teeth to go after polluters — two pillars of his environmental legacy that may soon collapse. His successor has called climate change a hoax and vows to roll back environmental regulations.

Meanwhile, each of Obama’s eight years in office have been among the hottest on record. The first mammal species to go extinct because of climate change, a small Australian rodent, disappeared earlier this summer as the United States resettled its first climate refugees from southeastern Louisiana. Coastal U.S. cities from New York to Miami Beach are projected to be under water by the end of the century.

“The problem ain’t going away,” said Bob Inglis, a former Republican congressman from South Carolina who supports climate change action. “When the streets are all flooded, they’ll find out all about climate change.”

CAP AND TRADE MEETS A COOL CONGRESS

In 2007, Obama excited environmentalists by rolling out an aggressive energy plan with a cap-and-trade system as its centerpiece. The ultimate aim was to cut carbon emissions by 80 percent from 2005 levels by 2050, “a level that scientists say is necessary to curb global warming,” with the interim goal of 25 percent renewable energy by 2025.

The plan — setting a limit on carbon emissions and then permitting companies to buy and sell carbon allowances, called cap and trade — came to some legislative fruition in the form of the American Clean Energy and Security Act. Implementation would have reduced aggregate emissions 17 percent from 2005 levels by 2020.

When the legislation passed in the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives in 2009, it was lauded as an historic moment. But it fizzled out in the Democrat-controlled Senate a year later due to a combination of factors: wary coal-state Democrats, industry and Republican opposition, a crippled economy, an overstuffed legislative agenda and a president either unwilling or unable to take the lead.

“My sense is that he spent a great deal of political capital on the recovery and the Affordable Care Act,” said former Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter, a Democrat who heads the Center for the New Energy Economy at Colorado State University. “And political capital is finite.”

Another theory is Obama played it too safe, and never gave Republicans much incentive to join the reforms. If he really wanted a domestic climate deal, Inglis said, he could have offered Republicans the chance to choose offsetting tax cuts in exchange for votes supporting a carbon tax.

“That would have been going big and going bold,” he said. “Instead, he went for an up-the-middle punch.”

Despite the stimulus and appropriations funding for environmental causes and clean energy, the demise of cap and trade epitomized a disappointing first term for Obama’s green base. But he vowed to regroup. Upon re-election, he promised that if Congress refused to take action on climate change, “I will.”

VICTORIES UNLOCKED, ON HIS OWN

When Obama did succeed, he relied on executive action to guide his climate change fight.

He found himself in a war on two fronts, said Glen Sussman, author of *American Politics and the Environment*. At home, there was a swelling base of climate change deniers. Abroad, countries like India and Saudi Arabia aired concerns about the burden a worldwide pact could have on their economies.

In his first term, he used federal agencies to achieve an array of modest policy goals, such as encouraging clean energy in agriculture, promoting carbon sequestration in power plants, and increasing energy efficiency in appliances, buildings and cars.

In his second term, Obama amplified this strategy.

In 2013, the Environmental Protection Agency introduced a first draft of the Clean Power Plan. The final version, released in 2015, focused on coal-powered power plants with the goal of reducing emissions from the power sector by 32 percent from 2005 levels in 25 years.

It was, said the League of Conservation Voters' Sara Chieffo, "the single biggest step we took to combat climate change."

And it served as the bargaining chip Obama took to the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. Environmentalists praised Obama's leadership and diplomacy as vital to pushing through a final deal between nearly 200 nations.

The Paris agreement is the first major international agreement with emission reduction targets and review processes for all signatories, including the biggest polluters of the United States, China and India. Obama ratified the deal without the approval of Congress in September 2016, with the United States pledging to cut greenhouse gases between 26 to 28 percent from 2005 levels by 2025.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the American Petroleum Institute lamented the deal as an assault on American businesses, and Republican lawmakers and conservative mediablasted Obama for overstepping constitutional bounds.

To supporters of climate change measures, it was something else.

"Incorporating a nonbinding agreement with trade repercussion was a really smart policy move since you know Congress was never going to approve any top-down treaty," said Josh Howe of Reed College, who wrote the book *Behind the Curve: Science and the Politics of Global Warming*.

Compared with his stated goals, the Clean Power Plan amounted to a Compromise.

In the eleventh hour of his presidency, Obama invoked a clause in a 1953 law for protecting federal waters to indefinitely ban oil and gas drilling in parts of the Arctic and Atlantic oceans. Environmentalists hailed it as a victory that pre-empts Trump's stated intentions to open more federal lands and waters for oil and gas exploration.

DRILL, OBAMA, DRILL

Despite the advances, some environmentalists see his own successful pursuit of American energy independence as a contradiction in Obama's record.

"The president left money on the table," Greenpeace spokeswoman Cassady Craighill said. "His administration has kept the Gulf of Mexico open to drilling, has allowed fracking to flourish with minimal oversight and waited until 2016 to put a halt to federal coal leasing."

Obama, who first campaigned for president when gas prices were \$4 a gallon, kept his promises to tap into international petroleum reserves and work to build a natural gas pipeline from Alaska. He broke pledges to tax windfall profits of oil companies and eliminate loopholes that benefit them.

He has also allowed the expansion of hydraulic fracturing, which has a relatively lower carbon footprint but emits larger amounts of methane, a more potent greenhouse gas. Climate change campaigners blasted Obama's limited regulation on the controversial practice as a giveaway to the oil and gas industry, as the industry complained that his "radical" disclosure rules were an "attack on American-made energy." (The rule was struck down in federal court last year.)

Under Obama, the steady 35-year decline of U.S. domestic oil production has reversed, almost doubling from just under 5 million barrels of oil per day in December 2008 to nearly 8.7 million barrels by mid November 2016, according to Energy Information Administration data.

The United States surpassed Saudi Arabia to become the world's largest producer of oil in 2014 and held on to that top spot until this summer.

The renewable energy sector, despite considerable monetary and policy support under Obama, accounted for just 11 percent of U.S. energy production in 2015, up by 1 percent from 2008.

Bill McKibben, one of the country's most prominent climate change activists and the founder of 350.org, considers Obama's policies a wash for the planet.

"He was never willing to expend the considerable political capital it would have taken to clash with the oil and gas industry. This is both understandable and sad," McKibben said. "Basically, Obama's America traded coal for gas, which was no real improvement."

The counterpoint, from Howe of Reed College, is that McKibben and other environmentalists made too much of Obama's climate agenda.

"Obama was never the candidate that Bill McKibben wanted him to be," Howe said. "It's hard to say he failed because his own terms weren't as aggressive. The green groups wanted a bunch of home runs. Obama hit a lot of singles."

FORECASTING TRUMP

Big-league reversals of Obama's regulations on carbon emissions and drilling, which Trumpvowed in his campaign, would require him navigating the same formal rulemaking process.

But there are other workarounds that could easily unravel Obama's work. Trump could simply no longer enforce the Clean Power Plan — his pick to head the EPA, Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, led the legal battle to dismantle it. He could just ignore the nonbinding emissions targets of the Paris agreement, rather than pull out of it and risk leverage for his trade priorities.

Obama's Dec. 20 drilling moratorium may have more lasting power, as the 1953 law that authorizes it has no explicit clause allowing future presidents to withdraw. It can, however, be challenged in court.

Some argue that instead of executive action, Obama should have pursued legislation, which is harder to undo. But Ritter said, "That's like saying if a person has a horse, the only time you should ride the horse is when you have a saddle," he said.

Trump's intentions could change. But even if he follows through and rolls back some policies, experts said some ships have already sailed, such as federal subsidies for renewable energy producers.

"My guess is that he'll have bigger fish to fry," said Chip Knappenberger, assistant director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute. "The oil industry will continue to prosper."

The economy may block other aspects of Trump's agenda, such as his pledge to revitalize coal. Experts agree that it's improbable if not impossible given the coal industry's competitive disadvantage compared with natural gas.

While there is some political resilience to Trump's pledged deregulation, the day that ocean rise will begin to slow and the planet will begin to heal looks further and further away.

"Obama was able to take the first steps that should have been taken 20 years ago. Those were going to lead us to at least a less-bad scenario," said Howe. "Even if that was the best-case scenario, our emissions stay business as usual, and that puts us in real trouble."

That best-case scenario is contingent upon the survival of the Clean Power Plan, which is currently in limbo as it awaits a ruling in the D.C. Court of Appeals. Its implementation, according to independent analysts at Climate Action Tracker, is essential for the United States to meet its modest Paris agreement emissions goal, "the least ambitious of what would be a fair contribution."

"Judged against the political reality, Obama is a climate hero," said Craighill of Greenpeace. "Against the scientific reality, he falls short."