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The Energy 202: Here's why two former Republican EPA chiefs are backing Biden over Trump

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Two former Republican heads of the Environmental Protection Agency are rebuking President Trump over his record on climate change and other issues — and are backing his Democratic rival, Joe Biden, for president.

Christine Todd Whitman and William K. Reilly say they are crossing party lines because Trump and his EPA deputies lack respect for the agency's science and history.

“There has been nothing like an administration on the environment in the last 50 years to compare with a dereliction that characterizes this administration,” Reilly, who served as George H.W. Bush's EPA administrator, said in a call with reporters organized by the Biden campaign.

By contrast, both say they worked well with Biden when he was a senator and support his plan to curb the country's greenhouse gas emissions.

The pair of endorsements is the latest fault line within the GOP between elder politicians and current officeholders over climate change.

Whitman, who was George W. Bush's EPA chief between 2001 and 2003, said she was aghast to learn the Trump administration had blocked federal scientists from talking about climate change at conferences.

“It is only those with their heads buried in the sand that don't think climate change is occurring, and that's Donald Trump,” said Whitman, who also served as New Jersey's governor for two terms. “I have seven grandchildren, and I really worry about their future with the denial of climate change,”

The two have found themselves in disagreement with other Republicans before.

Nearly two decades ago, Whitman left her job at the EPA after butting heads with others in the Bush administration who thought she was too willing to set new regulations. And she and Reilly aired their grievances during a Capitol Hill hearing last year against the agency's shrinking size and ambition under EPA chief Andrew Wheeler.

Yet increasingly, a handful of veteran Republicans have been saying climate change is a threat that deserves serious attention.

Two former Republican secretaries of state, James A. Baker III and George P. Shultz, as well as former GOP treasury secretary Henry M. Paulson Jr., are advocating for a tax on carbon pollution. In exchange for doing away with a host of EPA regulations, the group hopes a fee of \$40 per ton of the greenhouse gas will prompt businesses and people to cut emissions.

But those calls have largely fallen on the deaf ears of Republicans in Congress. Neither the House nor the Senate have advanced any climate legislation when Republicans controlled both chambers at the start of the Trump administration.

For Whitman and Reilly, Biden is a Democrat they can work with.

Reilly said he appreciates Biden's help in strengthening the Clean Air Act in 1990, when the Democratic nominee was in the Senate.

The amendments to the law, signed by the elder Bush, greatly reduced acid rain and proved to be one of the nation's most consequential environmental statutes. The decrease in particulate air pollution due to the law forestalled more than 160,000 premature deaths in 2010 alone, according to an agency study.

"His record is long, and it's very clear he has supported environmental health," Reilly said of Biden.

Whitman said she appreciates Biden's focus on the climate issue. Prodded by young climate activists once skeptical of his campaign, Biden is calling to spend \$2 trillion over four years to boost electric cars and energy-efficient buildings and to eliminate climate-warming emissions from the power sector by 2035.

"He's got the proposals," she said. "He understands the importance of the issue."

Both former EPA administrators are part of Republicans and Independents for Biden, a coalition launched this month. Samantha Zager, deputy national press secretary for the Trump campaign, dismissed their support for Biden as an instance of Washington bureaucrats sticking together.

"Joe Biden has been part of the D.C. bureaucracy for nearly half a century, so it's no surprise these bureaucrats would leech on to Biden instead of support President Trump, who in just one term has already begun draining the swamp to ensure Washington works for the American people instead of career government officials," she said.

Wheeler has countered by saying it is "incontrovertible" the environment has actually improved under Trump's watch.

In a speech Monday morning at the American Enterprise Institute, a right-wing think tank, Trump's EPA chief said the agency has returned to its core work, which includes cleaning up toxic Superfund sites and financing clean water infrastructure, during his tenure.

At the same time, he criticized his predecessors in the Barack Obama administration for what he called an "overweening focus on climate change" that amounts to "virtue-signaling" to foreign governments.

The Trump administration has rolled back several Obama-era rules designed to combat climate change, including regulating methane emissions from oil wells and curbing carbon dioxide releases from coal-fired power plants. U.N. climate scientists say the world has just a decade to cut emissions and forestall a dangerous rise in temperatures.

"We have done more in the first four years of the Trump administration to improve the environment than probably any administration, except perhaps during the very first years of EPA," he said.

Whitman took issue with Wheeler's assertion.

“If he would just substitute ‘delete’ [or] ‘destroy’ for the word ‘improve,’ he’d be right on,” she said.

Huge proposed mine in Alaska could end up being bigger than first thought.

The sponsors of a proposed gold and copper mine in Alaska said in a series of secret recordings released Monday that they think the project would be bigger and operate for decades longer than they have initially indicated to federal officials.

Top executives from the companies behind the planned Pebble Mine — the Canadian-based Northern Dynasty Minerals and its U.S. subsidiary, Pebble Limited Partnership — told environmentalists posing as potential investors that the project might end up lasting for 160 years and eventually double its output. The firms are currently seeking a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for a 20-year operation.

“Well, who’s gonna stop a mine that has 180, at a 160,000 metric tons per day, the first deposit that we’ve discovered at Pebble — and there will be more — but the first one lasts 180 years,” Northern Dynasty Minerals CEO Ronald Thiessen said in a video recorded by the Environmental Investigation Agency. “Now we could start Pebble at say 35,000 tons and grow over a 30-40 year period. No, we’re gonna start it at 160,000 tons per day. And maybe it grows to either 260 or 320 over the next 20-30 years.”

Alexander von Bismarck, executive director of the Environmental Investigation Agency, said the mine’s sponsors had deliberately downplayed its impact. A coalition of Alaska Natives, conservationists and anglers have opposed the plan for years on the grounds that waste from the operation could pollute nearby Bristol Bay, home to the world’s largest sockeye salmon fishery.

“These tapes show that potential investors are given an entirely different vision for this massive mine than the government and the public,” he said.

In a statement, Pebble CEO Tom Collier said he had not had time to review the tapes but “there are some pretty questionable ethics at play” given that the individuals making the recordings disguised their identities throughout the process.

“Beyond that, I can tell you what we’ve seen reported in these tapes thus far is not inconsistent with the position that Northern Dynasty and the Pebble Partnership have taken for the past several years,” he said, adding that if the company wanted to operate the mine for longer than two decades it would have to apply for additional permits.

Some of the harshest comments made during the recording concern Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska). Thiessen said that while the senator had raised concerns about the mine, “She in her heart wants the project to go ahead. She will say things that appeal to sometimes people’s emotions, but that won’t do any damage to the project overall.”

Both Thiessen and Collier implied that Murkowski and Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) misinterpreted a letter the Corps recently issued on the mine. At another point, Collier said of both senators, “So right now, they’re just sort of sitting over in a corner and being quiet. OK?”

In response, Murkowski reemphasized she opposes the current proposal. “Let me be clear: I did not misunderstand the Army Corps’ recent announcement,” she said in a statement. “I am not

‘embarrassed’ by my statement on it and I will not be ‘quiet in the corner.’ I am dead set on a high bar for large-scale resource development in the Bristol Bay watershed. The reality of this situation is the Pebble project has not met that bar and a permit cannot be issued to it.”

A spokesman for Collier said he “regrets the way he conveyed their influence and importance” of the two senators.

NOAA's next chief scientist may be a meteorologist who has criticized dire climate projections.

“The White House has tapped Ryan Maue, a meteorologist who has challenged connections between extreme weather and climate change, to serve as the new chief scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA),” our colleagues Andrew Freedman and Jason Samenow [report](#).

The appointment, which is pending ethics and security reviews, would put Maue in a leadership position at the agency, where he would help establish research priorities and enforce the agency’s scientific integrity policy, which is meant to prevent political influence in its scientific work.

Maue serves as the developer for [weathermodels.com](#), a site that makes weather models and graphics for hobbyists and professionals. He was previously an adjunct scholar with the libertarian Cato Institute think tank.

“Along with Patrick Michaels, a well-known climate change contrarian, Maue penned a 2018 op-ed in the Wall Street Journal challenging the climate change projections made in 1988 by noted former NASA scientist James Hansen, which other researchers, backed up by peer-reviewed studies, have found were prescient,” Freedman and Samenow write.

While he does not dispute human activities are driving global warming, Maue has been critical of efforts to curb the use of fossil fuels and efforts to link extreme weather patterns to a broader trend of climate change.

Recently Maue has criticized California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) for linking wildfires in his state to climate change. Climate studies show global warming has made wildfires more frequent and intense.

General Electric announced Monday it won’t build coal-powered plants.

“The move marks a dramatic reversal for GE. Just five years ago, the company doubled down on coal by acquiring Alstom's power business, which makes coal-fueled turbines,” CNN [reports](#). “That \$9.5 billion deal — GE's biggest-ever industrial purchase — proved to be a disaster. Coal has been crushed by the rise of natural gas and a shift toward solar, wind and renewable energy.”

The company, which is struggling with mounting debt and declining profits, already laid off thousands of power workers, and the move to drop coal may spell more layoffs, asset sales and site closures.

While GE will continue to service its existing coal power plants, the move is part of a broader shift away from dirtier fuels. In 2019 the United States consumed more energy from renewable sources than from coal for the first time since before 1885, CNN reports.

Trump campaigned in 2016 on a promise that he would bring back jobs in the coal industry, but the industry has failed to compete with cheaper, more environmentally friendly energy, and Republicans have largely moved away from messaging focused on reviving coal.

Walmart plans to reach net-zero emissions for its global operations by 2040.

The retail giant also announced Monday that it intends to power its facilities with 100 percent renewable energy sources by 2035. It also plans to transition to all electric vehicles, including trucks, by 2040 and help restore or manage 50 million acres of land by 2030, Bloomberg News reports.

Walmart's plan, however, is restricted to direct emissions from Walmart's own business and from energy that it purchases. The net-zero goal targets only about 5 percent of the retailer's total emissions, excluding indirect emissions from suppliers or customers. Walmart has sought to tackle some of its global supply chain emissions through a separate effort called Project Gigaton.

Walmart is one of dozens of businesses that have promised to reach net-zero emissions in the next 20 years. In a separate article yesterday, Bloomberg reports that Amazon, which has committed to zero emissions by 2040, does not have a clear path for how it will reach that goal.

Thermometer

Tropical storm Beta nears landfall in Texas.

"After meandering in the Gulf of Mexico throughout the weekend, Tropical Storm Beta is making its final approach to the Texas coast Monday, bringing heavy rain, gusty winds and storm-surge flooding," our colleague Matthew Cappucci writes.

Rain totals exceeded a foot in some areas, and some parts of the Texas and Louisiana coast are seeing storm surges between two and four feet.

"Beta is only the second storm in 15 years to be assigned a Greek letter for its name, attesting to the rapid-fire generation of storms this season that quickly exhausted 2020's list of conventional hurricane names," Cappucci writes.

New York City's climate clock is counting down the amount of time left to save the planet from climate disaster.

"How long does the world have left to act before an irreversible climate emergency alters human existence as we know it? A new digital clock unveiled in Manhattan's Union Square over the weekend promises to tell you — down to the very second," our colleague Jennifer Hassan reports.

"The Climate Clock unveiled by artists Gan Golan and Andrew Boyd warned at 1:30 p.m. Monday that there were 7 years, 101 days, 17 hours, 29 minutes and 22 seconds until Earth's carbon budget is depleted, based on current emission rates," Hassan writes.

Lucky Tran, a science communicator at Columbia University:

The clock shows two numbers. The first, in red, shows the amount of time that it will take at current emissions to release the amount of CO₂ that will bring the world to 1.5°C above

preindustrial levels. The second number, in green, tracks the percent of available energy supplied from renewable resources.

“Simply put, we need to get our lifeline to 100% before our deadline reaches 0,” the clock’s official website notes.

The clock, unveiled as part of New York City’s climate week will be on display until Sept. 27. It replaces the astronomical clock that was first erected at Metronome, New York City’s public art wall constructed in 1999.

Arctic ice shrinks to the second-lowest coverage on record.

“Warming in the Arctic shrank the ice covering the polar ocean this year to its second-lowest extent in four decades, scientists announced Monday, yet another sign of how climate change is rapidly transforming the region,” Reuters reports.

The only other time that ice has covered so little of the polar ocean was in 2012 after a late-season storm broke up much of the ice. This year, a heat wave in Siberia linked to climate change contributed to a record-fast decline in ice coverage during the first week of September.

“As the Arctic sea ice vanishes, it leaves patches of dark water open. Those dark waters absorb solar radiation rather than reflecting it back out of the atmosphere, a process that amplifies warming and helps to explain why Arctic temperatures have risen more than twice as fast as the rest of the world over the last 30 years,” Reuters writes.

The loss of the sea ice also threatens wildlife, including polar bears and seals.