

Will Biden's hard-hat environmentalism bridge the divide on clean energy future?

May 20 2023, by Chris Megerian



Central Maine Power utility lines are seen on Oct. 6, 2021, in Pownal, Maine. It's one of President Joe Biden's thorniest challenges as he pursues ambitious reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. If he can't streamline the permitting process for power plants, transmission lines and other projects, the country is unlikely to have the infrastructure needed for a future powered by carbon-free electricity. Credit: AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty, File

When John Podesta left his job as an adviser to President Barack Obama nearly a decade ago, he was confident that hundreds of miles of new power transmission lines were coming to the Southwest, expanding the reach of clean energy throughout the region.

So Podesta was shocked to learn last year, as he reentered the federal government to work on [climate issues](#) for President Joe Biden, that the lines had never been built. They still hadn't even received final regulatory approval.

"These things get stuck and they don't get unstuck," Podesta said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Podesta is now the point person for untangling one of Biden's most vexing challenges as he pursues ambitious reductions in [greenhouse gas emissions](#). If the president cannot streamline the permitting process for power plants, [transmission lines](#) and other projects, the country is unlikely to have the infrastructure needed for a future powered by carbon-free electricity.

The issue has become an unlikely feature of high-stakes budget talks underway between the White House and House Republicans as they try to avoid a first-ever default on the country's debt by the end of the month.

Whether a deal on permitting can be reached in time is unclear, with Republicans looking for ways to boost oil drilling and Democrats focused on clean energy. But its mere presence on the negotiating table is a sign of how political battle lines are shifting. Although American industry and labor unions have long chafed at these kinds of regulations, some environmentalists have now grown exasperated by red tape as well.

That represents a stark change for a movement that has been more

dedicated to slowing development than championing it, and it has caused unease among longtime allies even as it creates the potential for new partnerships. Still, this transformation is core to Biden's vision of hard-hat environmentalism, which promises that shifting away from [fossil fuels](#) will generate blue-collar jobs.

"We have to start building things again in America," Podesta said. "We got too good at stopping things, and not good enough at building things."

What gets built, of course, is the question that's the central hurdle for any agreement.

The issue of permitting emerged last year during negotiations with Sen. Joe Manchin, a West Virginia Democrat who was a key vote for the Inflation Reduction Act, far-reaching legislation that includes financial incentives for clean energy.

Manchin pushed a separate proposal that would make it easier to build infrastructure for renewable energy and fossil fuels. His focus has been the Mountain Valley Pipeline, which would carry [natural gas](#) through his home state.

Republicans called the legislation a "political payoff." Liberal Democrats described it as a "dirty side deal." Manchin's idea stalled.

Nonetheless, Elizabeth Gore, [senior vice president](#) for political affairs at the Environmental Defense Fund, said the senator "gets a lot of credit for really elevating this."

"It was his effort that really put this issue on the map," she said.

Since then, the Capitol has been awash in proposals to alleviate permitting bottlenecks. House Republicans passed their own as part of

budget legislation last month, aiming to increase production of oil, natural gas and coal. Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., recently introduced another proposal geared toward clean energy.

"I think there is a path forward," Gore said, describing all the ideas "as stepping stones."

Neil Bradley, executive vice president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, was also optimistic.

"The hurdle isn't whether people think it's a good idea or not," he said. "The hurdle is getting the details worked out."

Despite broad interest in permitting changes, reaching a deal will likely involve trade-offs that are difficult for Democrats and environmentalists to stomach.



Senior Advisor to the President for Clean Energy Innovation and Implementation John Podesta speaks during a news conference on Dec. 20, 2022, in Washington, announcing the Postal Service will sharply increase the number of electric-powered delivery trucks in its fleet. Podesta is now the point person for untangling one of President Joe Biden's most vexing challenges as he pursues ambitious reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. If the president can't streamline the permitting process for power plants, transmission lines and other projects, the country is unlikely to have the infrastructure needed for a future powered by carbon-free electricity. Credit: AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana, File

Republicans want to see more fossil fuels and, now that they control the House, no proposal will advance without their consent. But too many concessions to Republicans in the House could jeopardize support in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

Biden has frustrated environmentalists by approving Willow, an [oil drilling](#) project in an untouched swath of Alaskan wilderness. After Podesta finished a speech on permitting at a Washington think tank this month, activists rushed to block his vehicle with a white banner that said "end fossil fuels" in bold black letters.

Podesta argues that it's impossible to immediately phase out oil and gas, and he said the status quo won't suffice when it comes to building clean energy infrastructure. He points to [federal data analyzed by the Brookings Institution](#) that found permitting transmission lines can take seven years, while natural gas pipelines take less than half that time.

He was circumspect when asked about where the negotiations may lead.

"There is bipartisan interest in the topic," Podesta said. "Where any of that ends, I can't predict."

A deal could bolster Biden's political coalition by easing tension between environmentalists and [labor unions](#), which have often been frustrated by objections to projects that would lead to jobs.

"They've unnecessarily taken food off the table of my members," said Sean McGarvey, president of the North America's Building Trades Unions.

The relationship with environmentalists "could turn into an alliance depending on how this process ends," he said, but "we've got to do some good business to see if we're inviting each other for barbecues and crab picks."

Other factions of the green movement have already expressed frustration.

Brett Hartl, government affairs director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the administration made a mistake by allowing Manchin's proposal to be a starting point. The White House, he said, "negotiated away the game at the beginning and put the football on the 2-yard line."

He also criticized Podesta's approach to permitting.

"He's dogmatically saying that environmentalists are the problem here," he said. "It's easy to caricature environmental legislation as the boogeyman."

Historians trace the American regulatory system to a backlash against massive infrastructure initiatives in the middle of the 20th century, such as the interstate highway system and a series of dams. The projects raised concerns about environmental impacts and left local communities feeling steamrolled. More fears about ecological damage were sparked by an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, and fires on the polluted Cuyahoga River in Ohio.

The result was the National Environmental Policy Act, signed by President Richard Nixon in 1970 to require federal agencies to consider the environmental ramifications of their decisions. State-level laws, such as the California Environmental Quality Act, proliferated at the same time.

"We have a system that works for what it was designed to do," said Christy Goldfuss, chief policy impact officer at the Natural Resource Defense Council. "What we're looking at doing is optimizing that system for the future we need. And that's a fundamentally different conversation than anything we've had before."

"It's an incredibly difficult shift to make for the environmental movement," she added. "And I don't think everybody is going to make it."

Some organizations are going to continue to stand in the way of development."

And what about that transmission lines in the Southwest that Podesta was counting on?

The goal is to span about 520 miles, carrying electricity from a series of turbines in New Mexico that's being billed as the largest wind project in the hemisphere. The lines were rerouted to satisfy the Department of Defense, which tests weapons in the area, but local conservationists still say that natural habitats will be threatened by construction.

On Thursday, nearly two decades after the initial proposal, the [federal government](#) announced it had [approved the project](#).

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