

Environmental Policy in the New Congress

BY JOSH SIEGEL AND KELSEY TAMBORRINO AND MADI ALEXANDER | 11/23/2022 05:00:00 AM EST

PRO POINTS

- **After winning a slim majority, House Republicans are planning to apply strict scrutiny of the billions of dollars the Biden administration is spending on climate and environmental initiatives that stem from the bipartisan infrastructure law and [Inflation Reduction Act](#).**
- **Republicans are pledging to embark on a legislative push for faster permitting of all types of energy infrastructure projects, calling for wholesale reforms of environmental laws like the bedrock National Environmental Policy Act. And they are emphasizing streamlining approval of critical mineral mining and processing projects as part of an effort to highlight the current reliance of the renewable energy supply chain on Russia and China.**
- **The GOP is pitching forestry issues as one of the few bipartisan opportunities, with plans to promote legislation to enable the government to more easily conduct prescribed burns and similar projects to reduce wildfire risk along with planting trees to absorb carbon from the atmosphere.**

HOW WE GOT HERE

Republicans have long criticized what they consider to be Democrats' over-emphasis of addressing climate change in the hierarchy of environmental issues. As they take control of the House, the GOP is signaling they don't plan to make climate action a priority, and instead aim to promote broader stewardship of natural resources, with a focus on issues like exploring solutions to the Western drought crisis.

Their emphasis on permitting reform has a climate policy nexus since easing roadblocks to building projects would benefit energy resources and infrastructure across the board, from oil and gas to carbon-free hydro, nuclear and solar power.

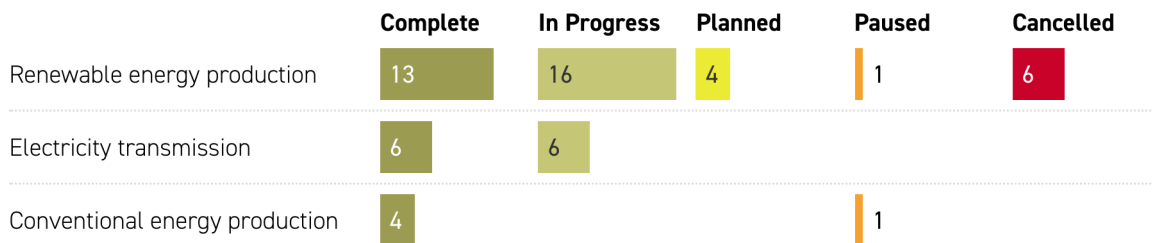
Democrats led by Sen. [Joe Manchin](#) and leader [Chuck Schumer](#) tried to pass a bill in the fall that would have helped build new high-voltage power lines to speed the development of wind and solar plants to shrink carbon emissions, along with speeding construction of the Mountain Valley Pipeline. Republicans blocked the effort because they said it didn't go far

enough to shorten the environmental reviews for projects, but Democrats plan to revive a similar effort in the lame duck session before the GOP gets a chance to more heavily shape a bill in the next Congress.

Republicans have different priorities, as their main concern is enabling the buildout of more pipelines and natural gas export terminals. And they're focused on making it easier for project developers to navigate NEPA and other laws like the Clean Water Act and Endangered Species Act, while reducing exposure to lawsuits — which could open up Republicans to criticism that they're undermining environmental protection.

Most federal energy infrastructure permits went to projects focused on renewable production

Permit status of energy projects, by sector



Note: Conventional energy production includes oil, gas and nuclear power.

Source: Federal Infrastructure Permitting Dashboard

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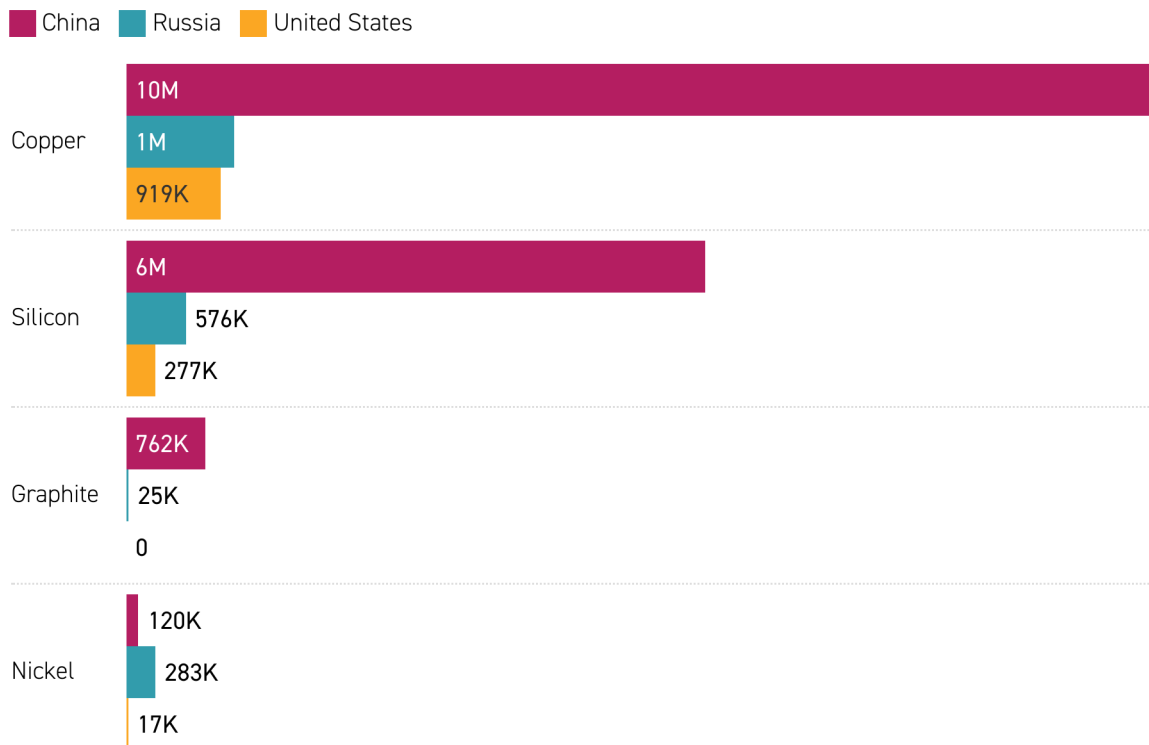
WHAT'S NEXT

House Republicans plan to advance an ambitious energy and environmental agenda in the next Congress, which will echo components of a strategy that [top Republicans released earlier this year](#). That earlier effort called for measures to stimulate oil and gas production, ease permitting regulations and to reduce reliance on China and Russia for critical minerals.

The expected chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, Rep. [Bruce Westerman](#) (R-Ark.), recently told reporters that GOP leaders are already far along in writing the energy legislative package they plan to introduce early in the new year.

China produced nearly 10 times more copper than U.S. in 2020

Selection of 2020 critical minerals production, in metric tons



Source: United States Geological Survey
Madi Alexander / POLITICO

Rep. [Cathy McMorris Rodgers](#), who is poised to chair the House Energy and Commerce Committee, has [also promised to push for a legislative package](#) in the opening months of next year that would ease permitting reviews for all energy projects. McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.) said the package would be separate from the permitting reform effort in the Senate that has been spearheaded by Sen. Manchin (W. Va.).

Republicans in the House are also expected to conduct robust oversight of the Biden administration's environmental policy — including probing spending and the Biden officials deploying funds under the bipartisan infrastructure law, Inflation Reduction Act and provisions in the CHIPS Act.

GOP lawmakers have also teed up oversight of specific agencies, including a look for potential overreach of congressional authority at [the Environmental Protection Agency, Forest Service and Council for Environmental Quality](#).

The House Oversight and Reform Committee also signal an interest in EPA's so-called "sue and settle" practice and its decision to prohibit the use of the pesticide chlorpyrifos, as [well as oversight of John Kerry](#), the special presidential envoy for climate.



POWER PLAYERS

- **Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.):** The presumed next speaker has led an effort in recent years to develop a GOP climate and environmental strategy to compete with Democrats, with an eye toward appealing to young voters, who are far more worried about these issues than older Republicans. But Republicans are planning to prioritize hammering the Biden administration over high energy prices while promoting domestic oil and gas production, which could distract from their pro-environmental message.
- **Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.):** Westerman, as the expected chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, will play the leading role in oversight of the Interior Department, the agency that has been at the center of Republican's criticism for implementing Biden's pause on oil and gas leasing. As the only licensed forester in Congress, he is also expected to pursue forestry legislation, explore solutions to the Western drought and to improve access to public lands.
- **Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.):** McMorris Rodgers is poised to become the first female chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. She has targeted permitting reform legislation as a top priority in the next Congress, as well as oversight of key federal agencies that are tasked with environmental protection and the nation's energy policy. She has also been a vocal supporter of hydropower and has eyed next year as an opportunity to address advanced nuclear and permitting around nuclear projects.