

Real Solutions for Fast and Equitable Decarbonization

A Repository Of Better Alternatives to Energy Deregulation

Switching from a fossil fuel-based energy system to a renewably powered one will help humanity avoid the worst impacts of the climate crisis. Worryingly, this transition is far behind schedule. Now, oil and gas corporations are capitalizing upon the urgency of building out new renewable energy sources to give themselves a leg up, too. Big Oil is throwing its weight behind “permitting reform” proposals that would weaken safeguards for energy development of all kinds, including dirty energy.

Oversimplified promises to accelerate energy production have attracted the support of some prominent supply-side liberals, who emphasize that it will boost renewables. Permitting reform boosters have accused people opposed to weakening environmental protections of being anti-construction. But supporting a *clean* and *just* energy transition isn’t being anti-construction; it’s insisting that the transformation of our energy system benefit communities and protect imperiled ecosystems while reducing the burden of extractive industry on our overburdened planet, including by phasing out polluting, planet-warming fuels.

The way to bring green energy online faster is not to gut the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) or otherwise deregulate the energy permitting process. Rather, we should expand the capacity of the federal government to advance the public good by hiring more civil servants. That’s just one example of what we’re calling “real solutions” to further a rapid and just transition. The following proposals aren’t comprehensive or mutually exclusive, but are operative on different scales and require different actors to bring them to fruition. Under each proposal, we compile a few sources for further reading.

Proposal 1: Accelerate Clean Energy Technology

False solution in current permitting reform proposals: According to the supply-side liberals advocating for permitting reform proposals that would weaken NEPA, federal environmental review processes are holding the clean energy transition back. They say that if we want to speed things up, we need to gut NEPA for fossil fuels as well as renewables, and loosen other safeguards. But deregulation is the wrong approach, enabling corporations to cut corners and evade accountability when they harm people and planet, and allowing profit instead of the public interest to guide energy planning. Oil and gas companies have already benefited from a “build

first, regulate later” approach that has left hazardous fracking fluids [under-regulated](#) to this day, [imperiling](#) drinking water sources, and allowed companies to [evade responsibility](#) for plugging hundreds of thousands of leaky orphaned wells around the country. This deep into the climate crisis, we can’t afford to repeat history’s mistakes. There are better alternatives:

Real Solutions:

Through the appropriations process at the federal and state level, legislatures can enable permitting agencies to hire more civil servants to handle the permitting process.

Read more:

- [Permitting Reform’s False Choice](#), David E. Adelman (August 2023)
- [Choosing between Environmental Standards and a Rapid Transition to Renewable Energy Is a False Dilemma](#), Roosevelt Institute (May 2023)
- [Playing the Long Game: Expediting Permitting Without Compromising Protections](#), Jamie Pleune, Environmental Law Reporter (November 2022)
- [Evidence-Based Recommendations for Improving National Environmental Policy Act Implementation](#), John Ruple, Jamie Pleune, and Erik Heiny, University of Utah College Of Law Research Paper (November 2021)

Utility regulators and legislatures can require or incentivize utilities to purchase more clean energy, faster.

Read more:

- [Entrenched Power: How Shareholder-Owned Electric Utilities Hinder the Clean Energy Transition](#), Roosevelt Institute (September 2024)
- [Demanding Better: How Growing Demand For Electricity Can Drive a Cleaner Grid](#), Sierra Club (September 2024)
- [How to Restructure Utility Incentives: The Four Pillars of Comprehensive Performance-Based Regulation](#), RMI (2024)
- [Shifting Utilities’ Incentives For Equity and Affordability](#), Virginia Conservation Network
- [TVA Can Lead The Way](#), Center for Biological Diversity

Utilities can upgrade existing transmission wires. This effort can be bolstered by utility regulators and legislation at the state and federal level.

Read more:

- [The 2035 Report: Reconductoring With Advanced Conductors Can Accelerate The Rapid Transmission Expansion Required For A Clean Grid](#), Energy Innovation, GridLab, and UC Berkeley (April 2024)
- [Accelerating Transmission Expansion by Using Advanced Conductors in Existing Right-of-Way](#), Emilia Chojkiewicz et al, Energy Institute (February 2024)

State legislatures can address local-level bans on clean energy adoption.

Read more:

- [Down to the Wire: Progressive Permitting Reforms Will Accelerate Renewable Energy and Transmission Buildout and Help Meet U.S. Climate Targets](#), NRDC (September 2023)
- [Opposition to Renewable Energy Facilities in the United States: May 2023 Edition](#), Sabin Center for Climate Change Law

Developers and permitting agencies can involve communities earlier and more substantively in the planning process to avoid later opposition.

Read more:

- [Halfway up the ladder: Developer practices and perspectives on community engagement for utility-scale renewable energy in the United States](#), Robi Nilson, Joseph Rand, Ben Hoen and Salma Elmallah, Energy Research & Social Science (November 2024)
- [Not Just Talk: Next-Level Community Engagement in Renewable Energy](#), NRDC (July 2024)
- [A Liberalism That Builds Power](#), David Dayen, The American Prospect (May 2023)

Elected representatives, renewable energy developers, advocates, and the media can expose and combat misinformation weaponized by fossil fuel industry-funded groups aiming to turn communities against renewable energy.

Read more:

- [Against the Wind: A First Comprehensive Map of how Fossil Fuel and Right-wing Think Tanks are Linked to Grassroots Anti-Offshore Wind Activity](#), The Climate and Development Lab (December 2023)
- [Unmasking Dark Money: How Fossil Fuel Interests Can Undermine Clean Energy Progress](#), Kleinman Center for Energy Policy (June 2023)

Proposal 2: Phase Out Fossil Fuels

False solution in current permitting reform proposals: Many of the current legislative proposals to force faster permitting timelines explicitly benefit new fossil fuel projects as well as clean energy projects. Proponents wave this away as a “necessary compromise,” or justify it as part of an “energy abundance” agenda, but these are just new ways of rebranding the same old extractivist capitalism as “part of the solution” to a problem that extractivist capitalism has caused. Without a planned, equity-oriented transition away from fossil fuels, no amount of clean energy permitting will stave off the accelerating climate crisis. The scientific consensus that fossil fuels need to stay in the ground is clear, but the lack of a political consensus around the need for a planned energy transition remains a central obstacle to curbing climate change.

Real Solutions:

Keep fossil fuels in the ground. The federal government has a variety of tools it can deploy to curb fossil fuel development on public lands, including eliminating subsidies, denying permits, and even buying out the fossil fuel industry. It can also accelerate the private sector energy transition through policies advancing decarbonization.

Read more:

- [No New Fossil Fuel Projects: The Norm We Need](#), Fergus Green et al, Science (May 2024)
- [An Economist's Case for Restrictive Supply Side Policy](#), Climate and Community Institute (March 2023)
- [Unextractable fossil fuels in a 1.5 °C world](#), Dan Welsby et al, Nature (September 2021)
- [Grounded: The President's Power to Fight Climate Change, Protect Public Lands by Keeping Publicly Owned Fossil Fuels in the Ground](#), Center for Biological Diversity (2015)

Governmental bodies at every level can clearly distinguish between clean and dirty energy in energy policymaking, and prioritize permitting and financing for clean energy while ending new fossil energy financing.

Read more:

- [Public Enemies: Assessing MDB and G20 international finance institutions' energy finance](#), Oil Change International (April 2024)
- [A Progressive Take on Permitting Reform: Principles and Policies to Unleash a Faster, More Equitable Green Transition](#), Roosevelt Institute and Climate and Community Institute (August 2023)
- [Congress Should Follow Biden's Lead on Fossil Fuel Subsidies](#), NRDC (April 2023)

The federal government can publicly manage and publicly finance fossil energy's replacement with clean energy.

Read more:

- [Green Industrial Policy's Unfinished Business: A Publicly Managed Fossil Fuel Wind-Down](#), Roosevelt Institute (September 2024)
- [Road to COP29: Shifting and unlocking trillions for a just energy transition](#), Oil Change International (September 2024)
- [Why the U.S. Export-Import Bank Must End Financing for Fossil Fuels](#), Friends of the Earth (January 2024)
- [Building Public Renewables in the United States](#), Climate and Community Institute (March 2023)
- [How FEMA Can Be a Leader in Tackling the Climate Emergency and Driving Energy Justice](#), Center for Biological Diversity

- [Energy transitions or additions?: Why a transition from fossil fuels requires more than the growth of renewable energy](#), Richard York and Shannon Elizabeth Bell, Energy Research & Social Science (May 2019)

Federal and state governments can design energy policy to reduce energy demand and increase efficiency, and deter growing energy-intensive industries like crypto and AI from destabilizing the power grid and bringing new sources of pollution online.

Read more:

- [America Needs an Energy Policy for AI](#), Heatmap (September 2024)
- [AI Boom Is Driving a Surprise Resurgence of US Gas-Fired Power](#), Bloomberg (September 2024)
- [Data Centers Gobbling Up Existing Nukes Threatens Grid Decarb Goals](#), NRDC (July 2024)
- [Bitcoin mining uses a lot of energy. The US government is about to find out how much](#), Grist (February 2024)
- [The US must balance climate justice challenges in the era of artificial intelligence](#), Brookings (January 2024)
- [Biden administration must rein in electricity-intensive cryptocurrency mining to meet climate goals](#), Environmental Working Group (May 2022)
- [How Energy Efficiency Will Power Net Zero Climate Goals](#), IEA (March 2021)

Proposal 3: Protect Ecosystems and Biodiversity

False solution in current permitting reform proposals: Many permitting reform proposals don't even pretend to be serious about decarbonization. Instead, they serve to boost all sorts of energy extraction, enabling energy addition rather than an energy transition. But even the permitting reform proposals that are serious about decarbonization can fall into the trap of decoupling the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis, which can't really be separated. A smart and just energy transition would replace fossil fuels with renewables in strategic ways that lessen, rather than deepen, the human imprint on nature, protecting imperiled ecosystems from further destabilization.

Real Solutions:

Developers, utilities, and government agencies can undertake smart land-use planning to identify best sites for low-impact, equitable, and uncontroversial renewable energy development. This effort can be bolstered by new legislation.

Read more:

- [Planning to Build Faster: A Solar Energy Case Study](#), Roosevelt Institute (October 2024)

- [Repurposed Energy](#), Alexandra B. Klass and Hannah Jacobs Wiseman, Minnesota Law Review (March 2024)
- [A Progressive Take on Permitting Reform: Principles and Policies to Unleash a Faster, More Equitable Green Transition](#), Roosevelt Institute and Climate and Community Institute (August 2023)
- [Minimizing habitat conflicts in meeting net-zero energy targets in the western United States](#), Grace C Wu et al, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (2023)
- [Low-impact land use pathways to deep decarbonization of electricity](#), Grace C Wu et al, Environmental Research Letters (July 2020)
- [Techno-ecological synergies of solar energy for global sustainability](#), Rebecca R. Hernandez et al, Nature Sustainability (July 2019)

State and federal agencies can merge conservation and renewable energy development planning to protect ecosystems and expand clean energy at once. This effort can be bolstered by new legislation.

Read more:

- [Don't Open The Gates: The Latest Dirty Deal In Congress A Trojan Horse](#), Erik Schlenker-Goodrich, Western Environmental Law Center (September 2024)
- [Down to the Wire: Progressive Permitting Reforms Will Accelerate Renewable Energy and Transmission Buildout and Help Meet U.S. Climate Targets](#), NRDC (September 2023)
- [Why Conservation Leasing on Public Lands Is a Win-Win for Renewables and Wildlife](#), Center for American Progress (June 2023)
- See the Center for Biological Diversity's page on the state of California and BLM's [Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan](#)
- See the "Balancing Renewable Energy Siting and Conservation" case study in [A Progressive Take on Permitting Reform](#)

Proposal 4: Protect Frontline Communities

False solution in current permitting reform proposals: Permitting reform proponents in the media often view community engagement and environmental advocacy with scorn and dismissal. But ignoring or steamrolling people affected by energy infrastructure projects will sabotage the long-term collective buy-in we need to transform our energy system. Thoughtful siting practices, active regulatory compliance, taking environmental stewardship seriously, dispelling misinformation, and listening to communities from the beginning are all practices that renewable energy companies can and should undertake in order to preserve and expand their social license to operate in this rapidly changing energy landscape.

Real Solutions:

Permitting agencies and developers can facilitate earlier, more substantive community engagement, identify and address possible significant conflicts early on, and dispel misinformation.

Read more:

- [The Power of Misinformation in Blocking Clean Energy Reform](#), FracTracker Alliance (April 2024)
- [Community Engagement Is Fundamental to the Permitting Process](#), NRDC (September 2023)
- [Uncommon Dialogue | Large-Scale U.S. Solar Development: Integrating Climate, Conservation and Community](#), Stanford University (2023)
- [Pursuing a Just and Renewable Energy System](#), Center for Biological Diversity et al (May 2023)
- [Sources of opposition to renewable energy projects in the United States](#), Lawrence Susskind et al, Energy Policy (June 2022)

Every branch of government can play a role in preserving legal pathways for the public to oppose fossil energy infrastructure and hold fossil fuel companies accountable for their public harms.

Read more:

- [Climate Lawsuits Are Exploding. Are Homicide Charges Next?](#), New York Times (September 2024)
- [The fossil fuel industry ramps up efforts to avoid accountability for climate impacts in court, while simultaneously suing environmental organizations and activists](#), Greenpeace (June 2024)
- [Democrats refer Big Oil investigation to Justice Department](#), E&E News (May 2024)
- [Big Oil faces a flood of climate lawsuits – and they're moving closer to trial](#), Grist (March 2024)
- [The People's Environmental Law: National Environmental Policy Act](#), Earthjustice (January 2023)
- [New Federal Anti-SLAPP Legislation Would Protect Activists and Whistleblowers From Abusive Lawsuits](#), Inside Climate News (September 2022)