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A fossil-fuel agenda can't stop clean energy

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Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's chief strategist, said the president seeks to "deconstruct the administrative state." Trump's efforts to curtail the federal government's capacity to protect public health, the environment and climate indicate that Bannon meant the president wants to eradicate mechanisms that hinder the ability of Wall Street, the fossil fuel industry and other billionaires to reap more wealth and power.

In March, Trump signed an executive order lifting the moratorium on coal leasing on public lands, began to dismantle the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Power Plan, and reversed policies requiring federal agencies to consider the effects of climate change in decisions. The order also rescinded the Bureau of Land Management's and the EPA's methane waste rules, and blocked further federal spending to make communities resilient to climate impacts.

Then, a leaked memo offered details about the administration's proposed draconian cuts to the EPA's budget. If Congress adopts the budget, it will slash funds for state, local and tribal management of air and water quality, cut programs that help reduce the risk of pesticides to human health and the environment, and restrict resources for the EPA's Children's Health Program.

Not surprisingly, Trump's budget also slashes funding for the EPA's Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance, including its Environmental Justice

program, with particularly bad consequences for low-income and minority communities.

Trump and his cohorts claim their actions will enhance energy independence by ramping up the use of fossil fuels, save jobs, and eliminate regulations that constrain the economy. The facts tell a different story.

Domestic energy production is already rising, but renewables, not fossil fuels, are the driving force.

Employment in renewable energy is growing 12 times faster than overall U.S. job creation. The U.S. Department of Energy recently said that 1 million Americans now work part- or full-time in the fields of energy efficiency, alternative-fueled vehicles and solar and wind energy. This is almost five times the employment in the fossil fuel electric industry, which includes coal, gas and oil workers.

Along the Pacific Coast, clean energy jobs are growing more than twice as fast as overall job growth. In Oregon, the solar industry employed 4,509 people last year, a 50 percent increase over 2015.

The U.S. economy is expanding even as carbon emissions are being reduced, showing that renewables and regulations are not hindering growth. Clean energy also reduces pollution and improves public health.

These data show that Trump's justifications for his agenda are a ruse. The actual driver is that Trump and his cohorts seek to ease constraints on the profitability of the fossil fuel industry, Wall Street and other billionaires, and reverse the trends that are weakening their control of our economy and political system.

Anger over the diminished status of blue-collar workers was a driving force in the presidential election. Like other autocrats, Trump manipulated these emotions with fear, ideology and falsehoods.

Many of the rural and blue-collar workers that voted for Trump are more vulnerable to pollution and climate impacts than other Americans. Trump's intent to eradicate policies that protect them from these afflictions indicate he is not particularly concerned about their well-being. If he were, he would instead launch programs to enhance their entrepreneurial expertise, stimulate the growth of renewable energy and other clean businesses, create jobs restoring forests to sequester carbon, and shift to carbon-neutral farming.

Trump's actions won't stop the transition to clean energy or efforts to protect the climate here on the West Coast. Jeff Bissonnette, executive director of the Oregon Solar Industries Association, told me that if Trump succeeds, solar might experience slower growth. But as long as state solar tax credits are maintained and Congress allows federal tax credits to run their course, the local industry will continue to expand.

Rachel Shimshak, executive director of Renewable Northwest, agrees. She said the combination of strong public support and commitments by the governors of Oregon, California and Washington mean the region will continue to pursue renewables and reduce emissions.

There is great concern, however, that if federal environmental research and regulations are dismantled, and fossil fuel use accelerates elsewhere, millions of people will be sickened, injured or killed, and runaway climate change will become an even greater threat.

Numerous polls show that most Americans, including many Republicans, oppose Trump's anti-environment stance. He and his moguls don't care — even if Congress ignores his proposed budget, he will implement much of his agenda administratively. As people now and in the future are harmed by pollution and climate change, expect to see the fossil fuel industry and Trump's other billionaire buddies continue to pursue profit and power.

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