

Biden Wields His Pen on Day One to Reverse Trump's Environmental Rollbacks

The 46th president rejoined the Paris agreement, axed the Keystone XL pipeline, and directed agencies to start dismantling his predecessor's policies that were harmful to the environment and human health.

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<https://www.audubon.org/news/biden-wields-his-pen-day-one-reverse-trumps-environmental-rollbacks>

Just as the Trump administration worked through its final days to weaken environmental regulations, President Joe Biden wasted no time in using his new authority to begin reversing his predecessor's rollbacks.

Along with signing executive orders aimed at addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing racial equity, and reforming immigration, the new president used the power of his pen on Wednesday to reassert the federal government's role in protecting the environment. Among a slew of actions, Biden **rejoined the Paris climate agreement** and revoked the permit for the Keystone XL oil pipeline, which Donald Trump granted early in his presidency. He also issued a moratorium on oil and gas leasing activity in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a vital area for migratory birds and other wildlife, just a day after the Bureau of Land Management **issued nine leases** in the refuge, the first-ever approved there.

The moves were not unexpected—Biden pledged, on the campaign trail and since the election, to take many of them soon after being sworn in—but were nonetheless striking after four years of climate-change denial and deregulatory fervor.

“We applaud President Biden for taking these critical first steps on our long journey to rebuild our economy, revitalize frontline communities, improve our health, reduce pollution, restore our public lands, respect Indigenous communities, and protect our wildlife heritage,” said Collin O’Mara, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation, in a press release.

The president also directed federal agencies to review and potentially overturn more than 100 Trump-era policies that the new administration says “were

harmful to public health, damaging to the environment, unsupported by the best available science, or otherwise not in the national interest.” Those include significant measures related to wildlife protection, including a rule that **sharply curtailed** the reach of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, others that **weakened the Endangered Species Act**, and land-management plans that **stripped protection** for the imperiled Greater Sage-Grouse across millions of acres of its shrinking habitat. Also under review are the Trump administration’s controversial interpretation of the Clean Water Act that **removed protections** from numerous wetlands and streams; its rule **opening the Tongass** National Forest in Alaska to logging; and **its rollback** of the National Environmental Policy Act, widely regarded as the bedrock of American environmental law.

“All of our work to defend core conservation and bird protections and urge action on climate for the past four years have become day one actions for the Biden-Harris Administration,” said David Yarnold, president and CEO of the National Audubon Society, in a press release. “Bird survival is human survival and birds are telling us they are in trouble. We have no time to lose.”

Biden also called on the Department of the Interior to review the boundaries of the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments in Utah and of Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument, which President Obama created due in part to the discovery by Audubon scientists that Atlantic Puffins spend winter in the monument. Despite objections from tribes and scientists, Trump **shrank the two Utah monuments** in 2017, opening parts of them to industry, and **lifted restrictions** on commercial fishing in the marine monument last year.

“We’re obviously very excited about working with the new administration,” says Patrick Gonzales-Rogers, executive director of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, an organization representing five tribes that advocated for the creation of that monument. “Because we had a fissure in the basic federal trust relationship with the previous administration, I think this will be a much more cordial environment.”

Biden also signed a proclamation that orders an immediate halt in construction of the wall along the U.S.-Mexico border and ends the emergency declaration that the previous administration used to divert billions of dollars in military funding to wall construction. Under Trump, construction crews have built new wall segments or replaced existing barriers with taller ones along **452 miles** of the border. The construction has been **devastating for people and wildlife** in the ecologically sensitive borderlands.

“The president’s quick action on this executive order is an important step toward repairing the senseless destruction and xenophobia that have shattered the borderlands for four years,” said Laiken Jordahl, borderlands campaigner at the Center for Biological Diversity, in a message to *Audubon* magazine. “We’re hopeful this leads to an end to wall construction and to healing for communities and wildlife. Contracts must be canceled, and not another foot of wall should be built through these beautiful wild places.”

The flurry of Inauguration Day actions were undoubtedly significant, but in many cases they mark only a first step. Reviewing the previous administration’s scores of rollbacks is not the same as overturning them—a potentially long and complicated process. Preventing development in the Arctic Refuge won’t be a simple task, now that Trump’s government approved leases there.

But the first day of the Biden era nevertheless marked a clear break with what came before and announced the beginning of an administration poised for big moves to fight climate change and protect the environment. “We’ll press forward with speed and urgency,” Biden said in his inaugural address, “for we have much to do in this winter of peril and significant possibilities, much to repair, much to restore, much to heal, much to build, and much to gain.”