

A Progressive Take on Permitting Reform: Principles and Policies to Unleash a Faster, More Equitable Green Transition

The climate crisis is hitting communities across the United States with increasing force—wildfire seasons become more extreme each year, hurricanes hit the Gulf Coast with more ferocity, and droughts are increasingly hurting farmers in the Midwest. To combat the climate crisis, the United States desperately needs to unleash a transition to renewable energy. Though the US continues to add more renewable energy capacity to the grid each year, climate advocates rightfully feel the transition is still far too slow. In July 2022, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided a generous suite of financial incentives for building out renewable energy capacity, but advocates worry that projects will get stymied in implementation due to the environmental review process required to gain the necessary permits to start building. Advocates aiming to change environmental review argue that it is time-consuming, burdensome, and slows down the build-out of renewable energy.

Enter permitting reform. A number of climate advocates have called for “cutting red tape” and “streamlining” the environmental review required for permitting processes in the name of speedier climate action. However, this substantially oversimplifies a complex dynamic of factors that have slowed renewable energy and transmission build-out. Unrelated issues such as interconnection to the electricity grid and local zoning are often confused with “permitting reform” in discussions about how to accelerate climate action.

As a result, environmental review for permits—specifically the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the federal law requiring federal agencies like the Bureau of Land Management or Forest Service to consider environmental impacts in decision-making and planning—has become the focus of reforms, instead of the much-needed focus on other areas critical to rapid decarbonization.

Permitting reform focused solely on environmental review threatens to undermine key laws that protect drinking water and prevent air pollution, and may commit the US to fossil fuel production that will emit unsafe levels of greenhouse gases. In fact, much of the push for permitting reform has come from the oil and gas industry looking to weaken environmental laws to push through fossil fuel projects in the name of “energy security.”

After a long and drawn-out political contest over these reforms, President Biden signed the Fiscal Responsibility Act into law in June 2023. The law includes a suite of problematic reforms to NEPA, such as creating arbitrary review deadlines and weakening procedural safeguards in an attempt to accelerate the issuance of permits. Even worse, the law also includes a mandate to build the Mountain Valley Pipeline, which would emit tens of millions of tons of greenhouse gas emissions over the lifetime of the project.

We need policy reforms that equitably accelerate build-out of renewable energy—not fossil fuels. In this report, we outline a progressive alternative to permitting reform, one that focuses on increasing public capacity for planning, assessment, and community engagement to ignite the transition. Our

proposals are informed by the factors actually slowing down energy transition implementation—which include continued fossil fuel build-out and lock-in and poor planning by project developers, which can result in low community acceptance of renewable energy and transmission infrastructure. A progressive agenda should also be reparative—supporting communities that have been and continue to be most harmed by our extractive, fossil-fueled system. Below, we outline key strategies to equitably hasten the transition:

Enable More Coordination and Planning

- **Utilize long-range land-use planning:** Land managers and planners should employ comprehensive land-use planning, including the identification of lands and corridors where renewable and transmission infrastructure projects can be built rapidly, equitably, and without controversy.
- **Increase transparency and accountability of processes for interconnecting renewable energy to the electricity grid:** Ensure electricity grid operators' decision-making is transparent and accountable, and that it feeds into larger planning processes (including interregional ones).
- **Increase capacity of permitting agencies:** Provide agencies in charge of permitting review with more staff, more effective training, and more power to move processes forward, to allow them to more efficiently and effectively review and assess projects.
- **Build public renewables and transmission:** Empower the federal government to deploy renewable energy and transmission infrastructure. The federal government has strong regional and interregional mandates, long-term planning horizons, and an ability to absorb financial risks, making it better able to build the regional and interregional projects needed for the transition.
- **Increase material and energy efficiency:** Handle the challenge of building renewable energy infrastructure fast by increasing efficiency and lowering material use to limit need for build-out.
- **Support distributed energy resources:** Avoid some large-scale build-out for infrastructure, such as for transmission, by deploying distributed energy resources like rooftop solar, batteries, and microgrids.
- **Update the 1872 General Mining Act:** Amend oversight of mining of critical metals and minerals, a crucial part of the energy transition, to include environmental protections and effective royalties, reduce mining waste, and ensure community consent.

Enhance Community Participation and Consent

- **Strengthen the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA):** Strengthen community participation early in the permitting process to make it more likely that projects will move forward faster, without as much community opposition.
- **Respect tribal sovereignty:** Engage federally recognized and unrecognized Indigenous communities in consultations regarding cultural resource and land stewardship and build trust in nation-to-nation negotiations on new energy infrastructure early on.

- **Apply cumulative impact analysis:** Evaluate the total burden on health, well-being, and quality of life that comes from an additional project in a community.
- **Provide community benefit:** Provide community benefits from energy projects, like jobs, discounted energy, local infrastructure investments, and even direct ownership to receive a portion of the profits.

Empower a Just Transition

- **Stop all new fossil fuel permits:** Stop issuing permits for new fossil fuel infrastructure that is incompatible with climate action goals.
- **Protect communities from fossil fuel pollution:** Increase setback limits for oil and gas wells and retire fossil-fueled peaker plants near communities, shutting down the energy infrastructure that's most harmful to the environment and public health first.
- **Set emissions reduction targets to phase out fossil fuels:** States and the federal government can and should set ambitious and legally binding emissions reduction targets to hasten renewable energy deployment.



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About the Climate and Community Project

The **Climate and Community Project** is a progressive climate policy think tank that mobilizes a network of leading academic and movement researchers in developing cutting-edge research at the climate-inequality nexus. The Climate and Community Project has produced multiple research briefs alongside movement and political partners, including [“Green New Deal for Public Schools,”](#) [“Achieving Zero Emissions with More Mobility and Less Mining,”](#) and [“Building Public Renewables in the United States.”](#)