

Electric vehicles and biofuel: Pentagon poised to go greener under Biden

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By KELSEY TAMBORRINO

The Pentagon is weighing a series of proposals to make the military more energy efficient, from mandating all-electric vehicles to weaning trucks, ships and aircraft off of fossil fuels, according to people familiar with the options.

The Biden administration has made clear from the beginning that combating climate change is a top priority — and the Pentagon, the world's single largest energy consumer, has a key role to play. The military has a record of developing new policies intended to curb greenhouse gases, and a massive budget of roughly \$700 billion annually to carry them out.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has already signaled that he will move quickly on this issue, establishing a Climate Working Group in March to coordinate the Pentagon response to climate change and track its implementation.

"Climate change presents a growing threat to U.S. national security interests and defense objectives," Austin wrote in a March 9 memo. "The department will act immediately to include the security implications of climate change in our risk analyses, strategy development and planning guidance."

The possible changes, laid out by three people familiar with the proposals, come as the Biden administration rolls out an ambitious, eight-year infrastructure plan aimed at eliminating carbon emissions from the power grid by 2035 and across the economy by 2050.

In parallel with this plan, the Pentagon is looking to mandate that all non-combat vehicles be electric by 2030 and to finance more projects to reduce the carbon footprint and harden facilities against the effects of climate change, according to multiple experts who have been advising the Pentagon.

"Climate change is a growing threat to our security and we need to integrate climate risk into all of our planning," said Pentagon spokesperson Pete Hughes, noting that increasing energy efficiency can also make military operations more agile. "It's also essential that we compete for the clean energy technologies of the future as they will be essential to capability."

Still, in the face of flat defense budgets, the effort will have to compete with other top Pentagon priorities, such as modernizing the nuclear triad and developing new technologies ranging from artificial intelligence to hypersonic weapons.

At least in the early going, some Republican lawmakers who are traditionally skeptical of efforts related to climate change have signaled they're willing for the military to go green if it enhances the mission.

Even though Democrats are in the majority in both houses of Congress, they will need to get some Republicans on board to push through some of the climate proposals. And that also means striking deals with those lawmakers, who will want to protect funding for weapons programs in an essentially flat budget.

"There'll be some [policy differences] that'll come up," Sen. Jim Inhofe, the top Republican on the Armed Services Committee, said in an interview. "Right now we're in this big crisis on the F-35. And so people already in the new administration are saying 'Oh, there's a weak place there. We could spend that money on global warming.'"



Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman James Inhofe, R-Okla., speaks to reporters following a GOP policy meeting on Capitol Hill, Tuesday, June 30, 2020, in Washington. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta) | Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP Photo

"The philosophy [of] a lot of the people, as we know, in this administration [is to] to try to find any area of weakness that they will spend that money on," he added, noting that progressive lawmakers have pushed to cut spending on nuclear weapons and redirect that

money toward domestic priorities such as fighting climate change. "We used to do this with the [nuclear] triad. All they have to do is take one leg out [and] look how much money they'd spend on the environment."

Other Republicans will likely push back more harshly. In response to this article, a spokesperson for Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) said climate programs distract from the military's "core mission."

"Sen. Cruz believes the Pentagon's job is to be big enough to deter America's enemies and adversaries, and to be strong enough to take necessary and successful military action if deterrence fails," said the spokesperson, Jessica Skaggs. "Allowing climate alarmists and Green New Deal enthusiasts to undermine or distract from that core mission is the height of irresponsibility and endangers the safety and lives of Americans."

But lawmakers in both parties and experts who have been urging the Pentagon to do more with its vast resources to help fight climate change are encouraged that the issue is a central element of the Pentagon's budget planning.

In a memo last month, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks directed the Pentagon's Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation office to evaluate "initial options for investment and set ground work for additional investments" between fiscal years 2023 and 2027.

She also set up a high-level Climate Change Working Group, which held its first meeting on March 17. "Confronting climate challenges is mission critical," [Hicks tweeted](#). "New demands on the force impact readiness."

Where Obama left off

Ray Mabus, who was Navy secretary under former President Barack Obama and remains an influential voice on energy matters, referenced the success of his push to get the Navy off of fossil fuels, setting a goal that by 2020 at least half of all naval energy would come from renewable energy. The Navy has exceeded that goal: Today two-thirds of all energy used to power naval bases comes from renewable sources, mainly solar and wind, he said. This represents 1.2 gigawatts of energy — more than enough to power the city of Orlando, Fla., Mabus said in an interview. It also happened to save \$400 million, he said.

Mabus said the move to switch the Pentagon's fleet of roughly 200,000 leased non-combat related vehicles to hybrid or electric models would also spur domestic production of electric vehicles in the commercial industry.

"Number one: Moving off fossil fuels into renewables will have first just the direct effect of reducing the carbon footprint dramatically," Mabus said. "Number two: Where the military goes, the civilian world often follows."

John Conger, who held a series of top Pentagon posts overseeing energy and installations and also the budget, said at the “top of the list” for more funding are programs to strengthen the military’s own ability to cope with climate change, which is blamed for billions of dollars worth of damage to military bases and over the longer term threatens to make some unusable.

“How do you deal with extreme weather?” he asked. “How do you deal with flooding? How do you make sure that you have assured energy on base? How do you operate in the Arctic? When the Arctic ice all melts and you have a whole new ocean to patrol, are you ready for it? The Russians are ready for it.”

As a result, Conger predicts Biden’s first Pentagon budget request will seek more money for a series of programs that fund research into “sustainable solutions to meet DoD’s environmental challenges.”

They include the Strategic Environmental Research and Development Program, which works with the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Agency, and the Environmental Security Technology Certification Program, which seeks to transition innovative technologies to the field.

Also likely to get more funding are grants doled out by the Defense Community Infrastructure Program, which supports environmental resilience projects. And the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program also now covers efforts to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change on military bases, such as flooding.

New purchases

But where the Pentagon can make the biggest impact is in what he calls its “environmental aspirations,” including what it plans to buy in the coming years.

The Defense Department’s sheer size can lead not only the rest of the federal government but also boost the broader commercial market for greener technologies.

“DoD will decide how the federal government looks because DoD dominates the federal portfolio,” said Conger, who is director of the Center for Climate & Security. “The DoD is most of the buildings. DoD is most of the fuel use. DoD can lead by example. They can invent things. They can do a lot of stuff.”

That’s where the push for electric vehicles can have ripple effects.

“At the beginning of an industry, like electric vehicles are [in], having an anchor customer is really important,” he said. “That electric vehicle part of it, while it’s not going to necessarily change emissions much, it could catalyze an industry that will have those impacts more widely. That’s the importance.”

Conger also believes that many of these initiatives will draw bipartisan support. Even in the Trump era, he points out, there were a series of steps taken to better prepare the Pentagon to confront the climate crisis, including requiring the military to assess those bases most vulnerable to climate change and setting new standards for installations to be more resilient to its impacts.

At a hearing this month on climate change and national security before the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, there was broad bipartisan support for the Defense Department to do more to handle the impacts of climate change.

“I think we should prioritize it,” said Rep. John Carter, a Texas Republican who represents Fort Hood, one of the Army’s largest bases.

“There was broad unanimity on display during the hearing,” Conger said. “No doubts or skepticism on climate change was voiced, and it was a conservative Republican who went so far as to suggest that the Biden administration should prioritize climate change in its national security strategy.”

Using the big budget

Michèle Flournoy, who served as Obama’s Pentagon policy chief, agreed that the department has a significant role to play in reducing America’s carbon footprint. In particular, the Pentagon could use its vast budget for research and development to accelerate the development of new technologies to fight climate change.



Former Defense Undersecretary for Policy Michele Flournoy testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. | Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP Photo

“If you were to make [DoD] a platform for demonstrating and scaling the adoption of green technology, that could create a meaningful level of demand in the market to help grow green technology and industry here in the United States,” she said.

Tapping into the Pentagon’s vast resources to combat climate change is not a new effort, but it is one that ran aground during the four years former President Donald Trump was in office. For example, the Trump administration dismantled much of the support structure for the Pentagon’s climate change efforts, including doing away with the deputy undersecretary of defense for environmental security, a position held by Sherri Goodman in the Obama administration.

Lawmakers in the fiscal 2021 defense policy bill created an assistant secretary for energy, installations and environment, which could help streamline the new Biden administration’s efforts, Flournoy said.

Flournoy acknowledged the need for a strong process to coordinate efforts from John Kerry’s team at the White House, the Pentagon and other agencies. It will be important to have a point person at the Pentagon for climate issues, and to ensure that that official has the support of and access to the White House, she said.

“You need to have some kind of broader whole of government effort to make sure everybody is rowing in the same direction,” she said.

To ensure progress, the team should focus on “early wins” such as increasing efficiencies at DoD installations and switching to hybrid and electric vehicles — which won’t require legislation, Flournoy said.

“You’ve got to rack and stack the opportunities and start with the ones where it’s clearly a win-win to build some buy-in and momentum,” she said.

Connor O'Brien contributed to this report.

CORRECTION: An earlier version of this report misstated a word in a line from a memo written by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.