

White House Climate Advisor Ali Zaidi On Willow And Biden's Climate Agenda

<https://www.climateone.org/audio/white-house-climate-advisor-ali-zaidi-willow-and-biden%E2%80%99s-climate-agenda>

Recorded on March 31, 2023



Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. The Biden administration has passed more climate policy than many thought possible. An array of rebates and incentives are aimed at helping Americans get off fossil fuels.

Ali Zaidi: Whether it's switching to an electric stove, whether it's swapping out that HVAC system for a heat pump that runs on electricity, not natural gas, or whether it's getting an electric vehicle. (:13)

Greg Dalton: The policies span agriculture, research and development, biofuels, transportation and more. Woven through those areas is a commitment to environmental and social justice.

Ali Zaidi: We have a relentless focus on getting greenhouse gas emissions down, but we have such a bigger opportunity right now, and that opportunity is to restore that American dream. (:13)

Greg Dalton: The scientific evidence and public pressure backing the need to make this energy transition is only growing.

Ali Zaidi: Folks are relentless and feel impatient about flipping the switch going to clean, but we gotta bring everybody along if we believe the values that we espouse to.

Greg Dalton: White House National Climate Advisor Ali Zaidi, Up next on Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton.

Ariana Brocious: And I'm Ariana Brocious. Energy and infrastructure are taking center stage as President Biden's team fans across the country touting his accomplishments. Meanwhile Republicans in the House are making energy the focus of their first big piece of legislation.

Greg Dalton: Biden's policy wins on infrastructure and climate have secured vast amounts of funding, and that money is just beginning to flow in the direction of everyday Americans. Hundreds of billions are intended for EV charging, climate smart agriculture, rail, and modernizing the electric grid.

Ariana Brocious: And there are LOTS of tax incentives for citizens to run their homes and cars on electricity.

Greg Dalton: The Biden administration wants people to see and feel these programs in their lives heading into next year's election.

Ariana Brocious: At the same time, Republicans are trying to claw back some of Biden's wins. In the House they're advancing a bill that would revoke \$27 billion in funding for a green bank and repeal a fee on methane emissions. It also would seek to accelerate permitting of energy projects and weaken one of the country's bedrock conservation laws, the National Environmental Policy Act. Here's Majority Leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana.

Steve Scalise: If it's a cold winter as it's been, you're trying to heat your home, you're paying a lot more than you were a year ago because of President Biden's policies, so let's streamline it. And then of course we go into opening up more leasing. We streamline that process as well. So it's going to be great for American energy, it brings in more federal revenues, but it also lowers costs for family, that's why we're bringing forward the lower energy cost act, HR 1. (:23)

Ariana Brocious: President Biden has threatened to veto the bill if it makes it through the Senate.

Greg Dalton: Controversy is still swirling around Biden's recent approval of a new oil field in the national petroleum reserve in Alaska.

Ariana Brocious: As a candidate for president in 2020, Joe Biden made this promise:

Joe Biden: No more drilling on federal lands. Period, period, period, period. (:08)

Ariana Brocious: But he recently approved the Willow Project, an 8 billion-dollar plan to pump an estimated total of 600 million barrels of oil. Republicans, including Alaska Senator Dan Sullivan, are pleased:

Dan Sullivan: Huge benefits, not just for Alaska but for America. Up to 200,000 barrels a day, 2500 jobs, highest environmental standards in the world. (:11)

Ariana Brocious: But environmentalists and Democrats like New York Representative Jamaal Bowman are not happy:

Jamaal Bowman: We are living in a climate catastrophe. We have one human race, we have one planet. And we have people organizing across the country to make sure the Willow project doesn't happen, and to make sure that we invest in the clean, green renewable energy that's going to save the human race and save the planet. (:23)

Ariana Brocious: And the International Energy Agency states that developing new oil and gas fields like this will push global heating to dangerous levels and jeopardize net zero goals.

Greg Dalton: White House National Climate Advisor Ali Zaidi recently joined me for a conversation with a live audience at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco. I asked him why President Biden is contradicting his campaign pledge and the world's foremost energy authority by approving Willow?

Ali Zaidi: I think this is an example of some of the challenges we're gonna face as we go through this shift to a fully clean energy economy. What the president said on the campaign, he has worked to follow through on, so day one of his administration, he issued an executive order that, placed a pause on all new oil and gas leasing and directed his interior department to take a hard look at how, uh, that program was getting carried out around the country.

Now this is where life starts to get really complicated. A district court in Louisiana hit pause on the pause, that got challenged in the courts, uh, and it got reversed. so that's the big picture policy. And on this specific project, here's the complexity. We have acreage that was leased by the way, next to other acreage that's been leased on the North slope in 1999, right before some of the folks in this room were born, before I hit my teens. And in that period of time, the company, the state, a lot of stakeholders in that region have worked to develop that project. During the Trump administration, that project got greenlit, that went up to the courts. The courts said that not adequate amount of environmental review had been done. That got sent back to the interior department, and the interior department subsequently used that opportunity to scale back a project that had been leased, a project that had been permitted by 40%.

Is that a big step forward on climate? Absolutely not. Right. And is that a case in point of this inheritance of a legacy of decisions that have been made over the course of decades that we've gotta grapple with in the same way we've gotta grapple with the challenges that we're gonna face in scaling up clean energy? Yes. So I think for folks who look at that decision on the north slope of Alaska and feel a sense of anger, a sense of deep and profound frustration that's justified, if that's how folks feel to look at an inherited set of decisions that bind our decision space today and feel that way.

The question I think that we're presented with is what we do with that anger. Does it sort of cement our feet and make us feel a sense of despair and despondency, or does it encourage us to go further and faster? And I think as an administration, what we do is we take the sort of accumulated effect of the decisions that have been made by the federal government and by the United States over the course of decades. Take that whole and then figure out a way forward that's gonna be durable, sustainable, and it's gonna bring along all the folks that we need to be as successful as we're gonna be. So, you know, I don't want to gloss over how folks feel about the decision. I don't want to pretend like we're, this is part of a straight path

trajectory to where we hope to go. But you know, this is part of the complexity of where we find ourselves.

Greg Dalton: And, president Biden also announced that there was 16 million acres in Alaska in the Arctic that's sort of set aside. So there's, it seems like you kind of zigging and zagging, but this is bigger than Willow. The Economist reported that the Bureau of Land Management granted roughly 6,500 permits in Biden's first two years versus 6,300 permits in the first two years of the previous president. So how does that square with keeping fossil fuels in the ground?

Ali Zaidi: Yeah. Look let's just be really clear about the challenge we face and how we actually solve it. And let's be clear about how the law operates, because one of the things the president ran on was to make sure that the rule of law was established, that the laws were followed, that we did things in a way that was consistent with the rules on the books. And where we disagreed with the rules, rules on the book, we would try to change that. In the way that he's proposed, getting rid of fossil fuel subsidies in every single budget that he's proposed, including the one this past month. One leases come with specific, essentially contractual rights. And so to look at, you know, how that came to pass, you gotta look at the amount of leasing that was done under the previous--

Greg Dalton: Companies paid money for those rights.

Ali Zaidi: Yeah, they did. And the federal government accepted those. So that's, I think thing one is let's just be level about how these decisions get sort of baked in, the operations of government. The second is, and I think this is really important to just be very candid about how we're gonna get to where we want to go, for the family that's got a car parked at the end of the driveway tonight. It's probably the car that's gonna be parked there tomorrow, right? So they're not switching to EV necessarily tomorrow. And what we know is the most aggressive goals around the world, including California leading the pack, are to get to a hundred percent electric vehicle sales by 2035. That's new vehicle sales. All the other vehicles are gonna run for 10 to 15 years. That's how long cars generally tend to stay on the road. That is the legacy of inherited decisions. That's a complexity that we face. The implication of that is that even after 2035, as long as those vehicles are on the road, and it's probably gonna be a lot of folks who are low in moderate income, they're gonna have to fill up at the gasoline station.

Greg Dalton: Oil and gas isn't going away anytime soon.

Ali Zaidi: And you know, I think we'd love to be in a world where there's a single switch to flip. But the reality is there are 250 million vehicles on the road. And because, again, because of decisions that have been made by a bunch of folks over the course of decades, most of those 250 million vehicles are internal combustion engine.

Now, under the Biden administration, we've doubled the number of charging stations that line our highways. We've doubled the number of electric vehicle models that are available to consumers. We've doubled and are on track to quadruple the amount of electric vehicles sold in any given year. We're massively, massively changing our capacity to make those vehicles

in America, so we're going incredibly fast and we're picking up pace every single day to spur that clean energy transition, but we gotta meet people where they are. And we've honestly, we just gotta be honest about the facts of the challenge that we face.

Greg Dalton: Right. And the reality is that the US president doesn't have much impact on global oil prices. We're price takers, not price makers. And much of the environmental movement attacks and villainizes energy supply. And that makes for good fundraising and political campaigns, less is said and done on the demand side. How do you think about the supply and demand of energy as you navigate through this messy and necessary transition?

Ali Zaidi: So, the president said this at the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, when the global energy markets were in shock, turmoil. He got in the Roosevelt room of the White House and he said, I'm gonna do everything we can to support our brothers and sisters in the Ukraine. But let's be clear, true energy security is not at odds with climate security. True energy security is actually coextensive with it because the way we get there is by accelerating the deployment of clean energy technologies.

So the way we, end our dependency on fossil fuels to propel the economy is by making these technologies cheaper, by making them more affordable, by making them more accessible all around the country. That's part of the reason I'm here in the Bay Area, was a chance to meet with, uh, folks from Habitat for Humanity and Grid Alternatives coming together to make it so that solar on your roof for a charging station in your garage is not something that just rich folks can access.

And that's something President Biden feels so much in his core. That's why when he went and pushed for an electric vehicle tax credit in the inflation reduction Act, he didn't just push for one for new vehicles. He recognized for a lot of folks, a new car is not on the table. So he created a first ever used car electric vehicle tax credit. \$4,000.

Greg Dalton: \$4,000. And the Inflation Reduction Act offers an assortment of tax incentives to individuals and companies. Rewiring America publishes to some good consumer guides on home upgrades. And for those who haven't seen pretty interesting, Stacey Abrams now works for Rewiring America. But information on EVs, uh, to qualify for tax credits is complicated. There's some uncertainty out there, which cars qualify. I went to the Department of Energy and they linked me to the IRS, and so what? What can people qualify for today to run their lives on renewable energy? And what's the federal government doing to get information easily usable into people's hands?

Ali Zaidi: Well, first of all, and we should have just told you this before you went hunting online, clean energy.gov, that's the place folks go. You go to clean energy.gov and you see the picture of a house, and you see all of the things that you can swap out, you know, when they're due for a replacement. And how the Biden administration has secured a combination of rebates and tax incentives to help you do that.

Whether it's switching to an electric stove, whether it's swapping out that HVAC system for a heat pump that runs on electricity, not natural gas, or whether it's getting an electric vehicle. You click on the thing and it will tell you how and where to go to qualify for those things. Now,

that's not as easy as we need to make it, right?

We need to work with auto dealers cuz that's the place a lot of folks are interfacing with the marketplace. We need to work with contractors, plumbers, HVAC contractors. And we need to work and lift up the workforce that's gonna do this, all of this work. So that's why, you know, when we rolled out a lot of these incentives, we made sure to have the IBW, the electricians union, the UA, the plumbers and pipefitters union at the table so that they can be part of both the economic upside, but also helping deliver the good news to consumers That these are technologies that they, they are no longer for somebody else. You can afford them.

Greg Dalton: And that website again is?

Ali Zaidi: Clean energy.gov.

Greg Dalton: Thank you. I might actually remember that. good to know. Cause there's, there's a lot of learning curve there for even people who are invested to where to go and to get the installers to actually do the things. Silicon Valley Bank was a major lender to clean tech startups. How concerned are you that the turmoil in the banking system will slow down the financing in this transition that, that's so important?

Ali Zaidi: We've gotta stay up at night being concerned about anything that will slow us down in this transition to cleaner energy. That includes supply chains, it includes workforce and labor. It includes the availability of capital. And when we find a challenge, we've gotta take decisive action to knock it down and that's exactly what the president and his economic team have done in the face of what we saw at Silicon Valley Bank. Not only did he take decisive action to ensure liquidity, he has taken decisive action to make sure folks are held accountable. The folks who used to run that bank no longer do. And by the way, this is another place. You know, when we talk about the legacy of decision making in the past by the federal government, by vested interests, you can just go back and look at the tape from 2018 when folks were rolling back the very standards that probably would've helped us in this moment. Decisions have consequences and I think it's really important for us to one, hold people accountable as those decisions get made. But then also not get bogged down in the sort of inherited loss, but jump back up and figure out how to keep moving forward.

Greg Dalton: You're listening to a Climate One conversation with White House National Climate Advisor Ali Zaidi. Our podcasts typically contain extra content beyond what's heard on the radio. If you missed a previous episode, or want to hear more of Climate One's empowering conversations, subscribe to our podcast wherever you get your pods.

Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. You can also help by sending a link to this episode to a friend. By sharing you can help people have their own deeper climate conversations.

Coming up, how new climate policies could benefit all Americans, regardless of whether they supported them or not.

Ali Zaidi: In the same way a hurricane does not discern whether you voted Republican or

Democrat, it doesn't swerve if you deny climate change, we're not gonna be swerving to avoid folks on the upside opportunity we have here. (

Greg Dalton: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. We're talking with White House Climate Advisor Ali Zaidi about the administration's implementation of recently passed climate policy.

Ariana Brociuous: Next week we'll have contrasting perspectives on how to reduce carbon emissions while helping the economy. We'll hear from an energy investor on the board of a major oil company, who has some surprising things to say about gasoline and EVs. We also hear from the chair of the Conservative Climate Caucus, Utah Representative John Curtis.

John Curtis: There has to be some limitations on what we subsidize and the free marketplace should have a pretty good hand in which of these prevail. Our current law making is trying to pick winners and losers.

Ariana Brociuous: Hear that full interview with John Curtis on Climate One next week.

Greg Dalton: Ali Zaidi immigrated from Pakistan to Pennsylvania as a young boy and graduated from Harvard. I asked him how that life experience shaped his work toward a more just and inclusive society.

Ali Zaidi: You know, my folks made a just incredibly courageous decision to move here, over 12-13,000 miles, from Karachi to Edinburgh, from Pakistan to Pennsylvania.

And they had that courage, they had that impetus because they saw a big, bright American dream, where they thought they had a place where they thought their kids had a place. Where they thought the rules were written in such a way, fair enough that if they worked hard, their kids worked hard, they could get ahead and not just get ahead in some raw economic sense, but be afforded dignity and respect, be a part of a community that gave them a sense of connectivity and purpose.

That's what excites me about working on climate in this moment. You know, the president often tells us we're not, our team, the climate policy office of the White House, we're not greenhouse gas accountants, right? We have a relentless focus on getting greenhouse gas emissions down, but we have so much bigger at something bigger at stake and such a bigger opportunity right now, and that opportunity is to restore that American dream and build it back better, help it reach more people, help it feel more available and accessible opportunity for folks in every zip code for every single American. And so when we go about tackling the climate crisis, we're not just measuring our progress in terms of clean energy, gigawatts built or greenhouse gas, million metric tons reduced. We measure it in terms of the places that were idled, you know, turned into brown fields. They're now turned back on. How many of those places can we point to? We measure it in the people who felt left out, left behind. How many of them can we pull into the fight? As we move forward, we measure it not by how many pie in the sky ideas we can come up with, but how many projects do we have where

steel goes in the ground?

And where the steel goes in the ground, in the way, in a way that lifts up families and middle class communities around those projects. So that's, that's what excites me about this work is this is the way for us to lift up folks for prosperity and equity to really be blooming in this country in a way that I don't think we've ever seen.

Greg Dalton: Right. And that that gets to sort of, some people just want to kind of take fossil fuel, put in clean energy and leave the rest the same, the sort of society structure, power structures, class structures. Other people say, no, we need climate to address race and inequality, income concentration, that sort of thing. It sounds like you're in that latter camp of we need to solve climate and these other things at the same time.

Ali Zaidi: Yeah, and let me give you two really concrete examples. So electricity sector, electricity sector has been dominated by utility companies. And I'm not saying anybody is the enemy, but let's think about how we structured the inflation reduction act, how we structured our shift to clean energy. We've created a 27 billion climate bank at the EPA that's gonna facilitate financing of community-owned, community solar and storage projects all across the country. We made it so that the tax code is more favorable for rural co-ops and publicly-owned electricity companies. We made it so that when you deploy those projects, you get a bigger incentive if you're deploying in low and moderate income communities, or if you're deploying in a community that had a coal plant that shut down an energy community going through transition, you get five times higher tax credit. If you build in a way that also pays prevailing wage to the workers at that construction project and you want the full credit, you've gotta source those materials here in America and revitalize our manufacturing base.

So, that's transformative, right? That's transformative. Not just because it's going from dirty to clean, but because we're lifting up all these folks at the same time. And what's really important I think about this moment is not that we're just going back in time to, you know, something that was a little bit better a few years ago or a few decades ago, but that we're actually making progress even relative to where we were a few decades ago.

And I think what that means to me is not just building the new stuff clean, but repairing the places where we did damage.

Greg Dalton: And this is where it seems like policy and politics intersect because it sounds to me like they're addressing people that are a lot of aggrieved workers who feel like they've been left behind, who went over to MAGA frankly, that the Democrats lost because the factory left and went to China or somewhere else. And there was a story in Politico about how, a lot of the benefits of the Inflation Reduction Act would go to red Congressional districts represented by people who voted against the bill. And I talked to the head of the conservative climate caucus in the house. He said, I don't know, but that's pretty smart if they did that. Did you do that? Did you go after these kind of red areas and say, we want to make them green?

Ali Zaidi: Well, look, the president ran to be president of all Americans. He ran to be president for the benefit of folks who live in redress districts and blue, right? And he is

working tirelessly to make sure everybody comes out ahead, regardless of who represents them in the United States Congress and regardless of how they voted, and you know, I think that's how we're seeing the geography of opportunity manifest. In the same way a hurricane does not discern, right? Whether you voted Republican or Democrat, it doesn't swerve if you denied climate change, we're not gonna be swerving to avoid folks on the upside opportunity we have here. And so, you know, you look at a place like West Virginia where you've got United Mine workers who are teamed up with Sparks, a company from out here to build electric vehicle batteries in a factory in West Virginia, you've got steel being forged in West Virginia that's being shipped to Brownsville, Texas, where they're making a vessel purpose-built to facilitate operations of offshore wind off the coast, in the mid-Atlantic. That's like, that's the good stuff. That's what we need. That's the good stuff. And at the same time to the repair point, cause I think that's important. You know, we had a racist housing policy in the United States. We redlined communities. Folks were put in certain neighborhoods based on the way they looked. Communities that were historically redlined are literally hotter today. Fewer trees, greater pavement. We have 3 billion in the inflation reduction act to plant trees in those communities. We had a transportation policy that was racist. It divided communities. It ran highways literally through the middle of a neighborhood. We have money in the inflation reduction Act to reconnect communities. So we're building a clean energy economy. We're making sure it reaches every zip code of the country, but we're also being attentive to the work of repair, and that's really important.

Greg Dalton: The fossil fuel industry actually is fairly racially diverse, and it's more diverse than the clean tech industry. So how can renewable energy be more inclusive?

Ali Zaidi: Look, this is like the hard truths part of this conversation. I mean, this is so, so, so, so important. One of the reasons I think we were able to pass for the first time this kind of climate legislation in Congress is because folks took care to build a broad coalition. They invested in political economy, not just techno economics, right? We're near the valley. We've got Berkeley and Stanford and others helping push things along technology cost curves, that's really important. But the political economy is really important. And I think we are past due to be attentive to who gets to afford and access these technologies.

That's why we're spending so much time both with the sort of frontline delivery mechanisms like grid alternatives, but also with the tax code to make sure we're building in the incentives to drive the resources to the right communities. And with direct capacity grants to environmental justice organizations to help build up the literal human capital they need to be able to access these resources.

And I think the hard the hard part of this is folks who looked in the mirror for maybe 20 years and said, I'm good. I'm super socially conscious, I'm making clean stuff. Well, they gotta look in the mirror a little bit longer and say, who works at my factory? What is my workforce? Is my workforce empowered? Can they speak up? Can they organize? Those things really matter. And I think we've gotta look at the clean energy workforce and we gotta think about whether we respect them, whether we are giving them dignity, whether they're wor, not just giving them paycheck but benefits. And then we gotta look at where this stuff's getting deployed. You know, if you look at how solar got deployed, rooftop solar got deployed over the last 10 years. It's great. We're making progress, but it's a lot of folks with credit scores

above 750, folks like Grid Alternatives and Habitat for Humanity are helping reach down to 650, maybe lower. How are we helping people afford the transition we're talking about? I know, I know folks are relentless and feel impatient about flipping the switch going to clean, but we gotta bring everybody along if we believe the values that we espouse to.

Greg Dalton: Right. The narrative in climate world has been that clean energy prices have dropped dramatically and they will continue to drop. Yet clean is getting cheaper and, and, and that clean will win on price and virtue. However, during Covid, that narrative changed and prices increased for polysilicon used in solar, lithium carbonate used in batteries. Has that changed your view of the narrative of inevitability? Because there's been a sort of certain presumption that, well, you know, fossil prices are volatile, nuclears going up, but the clean is always gonna go get cheaper. That's not true.

Ali Zaidi: Yeah. I mean, look, I, I think have been around climate policy and clean energy industry long enough to believe that nothing is inevitable, nothing is inevitable. And all the progress that we make is the product of purposeful, patient, impatient, relentless pursuit to move the ball forward. And all along the way, incumbent interests or otherwise will create... first they fed us denial. Then they fed us delay. Now they wanna feed us cynicism. Right? That's the new always, that's the, it's always doubts, you know, it's like, oh, maybe we're not making progress. Maybe we should just give up, throw up our hands.

But to your point on, on what happened over that period of time, we underinvested in supply chains. You know, there's this mill in Moses Lake, Washington. Where they used to make ingots and wafers that go into solar panels and like so much of the solar supply chain, we wave to it as it went overseas. Now because of the inflation reduction act that mill is back on, it's got a 10 year contract and it's shipping ingots and wafers to get stamped into solar panels in Georgia. So that's the kind of stuff we need to do if we want to stay on this trajectory. But it's not gonna happen on its own. There are a lot of things that will work against progress, whether it's under investment in supply chain or it's under investment in workforce and labor. And we gotta stay ahead of all that if we're gonna make the progress that we need.

Greg Dalton: And there's a lot, you know, US has an industrial policy. Again, you know, this is now it's considered acceptable to have industrial policy. But according to the Niskanen Center, center right think tank, these requirements of, you know, buy American, American ingredients and electric cars, et cetera, could drive up prices and slow the pace of decarbonization. So is there a cost to bringing investment into the US and having this US requirements?

Ali Zaidi: I think we've been able to make that progress, and maybe prove that hypothesis wrong. And what we're seeing instead is that we're triggering a race to the top around the world to build more resilient and robust supply chains everywhere. European Union is looking to enact a set of policies that are gonna help expand their industrial capacity to manufacture these products. And to just take a step back, I think this goes to the, is the future clean and is that enough? I think it matters that the future is clean, but sourced from places that share our values. Where we don't have kids doing the work, where we're not fouling up streams and the air in the name of manufacturing, clean energy, those things really matter. And I

think if we're taking this opportunity, this inflection point that we're in, to rebuild the American middle class, but also lift up countries around the world that share democratic principles that afford dignity and respect to women workers, to their entire workforce, not just a few people. That's a really good thing to do and we should do it.

Greg Dalton: Do you say that to environmentalists who wanna stop this pipeline, stop this development, stop, stop, stop, stop. Not here. And effectively what they're saying, we want it to happen somewhere else because unless demand changes that pipeline or that oil extraction is gonna happen in Nigeria or Ecuador or somewhere else. So do you say that to people like, Hey, it's better to happen here in the US with better laws, labor, environment, et cetera?

Ali Zaidi: Well, let me answer that question in two parts. The first is, you know, we stipulated to the fact that in Paris, folks know the Paris Agreement, really big deal. We're not on track to meet it, but if we were on track to meet it, we would still need fossil based fuels well into the next several decades. So that's, that's just a fact. So to your point, it's gonna have to come from somewhere, right? And that's a fact. That should not make us complacent about the pace of clean energy deployment, but it's a fact. The second is where I think this challenge intersects, not just on fossil, it intersects on the density of housing and low, you know, affordable housing in places like this, right? It intersects in building transmission lines. You got, you know, some billionaire with a ranch who doesn't want transmission line to go in their backyard, well, come on buddy. You know, this is like part of saving the planet. And we're gonna have some real conflicts, whether it's developing critical minerals like lithium or it's that clean energy infrastructure. We're gonna have real conflicts with species and with other environmental values. And our answer cannot be, we throw up our hands and disengage. Our answer has to be, the stakes are very high. And we're gonna engage this question and we're not gonna villainize anybody. We're gonna look at the interests, we're gonna do the analysis, and then we're gonna make a decision and stick to it. And, you know, I think that's gonna be hard.

Greg Dalton: And involve some really hard, hard trade-offs. Yeah. I think there's a lot of purity that that blocks like, oh no, it's not perfect, so we shouldn't do it. Yeah. And that we don't.

Ali Zaidi: This president has been very clear, look, when it comes to getting clean energy built, when it comes to making sure that we have the minerals and the inputs to supply that clean energy, he is going to spur the permitting machine along so that we're hitting our marks cuz we gotta build this stuff.

Greg Dalton: Right. And that's was the next question, which is, you know what? That permitting is one of the biggest obstacles. This is an area where there's also divides within the Democratic party, which is one reason why the last attempt, permitting reform, led by Joe Manchin failed. It's back, it's, it's a priority for the Republicans in the house. Where is there a common ground? What do you think needs to be reformed on permitting both fossil and clean?

Ali Zaidi: I had a law professor whose entire semester could have been summarized in, if

things are the way they are, why do you think they are the way they are? ? And the answer almost always, was because somebody's winning, somebody's making a bunch of money with the status quo the way it is. So let's like just call it out and say, Hey, you know, there's a reason. Sometimes progress stalls out and it's because somebody's winning. I think what we've realized is a lot of these rules may make some one person, one entity, one set of incumbents prosperous, but it's not leading to prosperity broadly.

And so that's the trick here,

Greg Dalton: Because we have an electrical system that's a bunch of monopolies who have-

Ali Zaidi: know Yeah. Who say, Hey, I don't want you to build a big transmission line into my territory. And. put some competitive pressure on this power plan I just built, you know, 40 years ago. It's just a young,

Greg Dalton: It's working good for me.

Ali Zaidi: Yeah, So, you know, I think that's complex. And what I think we're seeing is there's common ground around the following things. One, there are process efficiencies, right? So we have depleted, depleted the human capital in the federal government that's necessary to do this work, right? All of these agencies are shadows of their former selves. We gotta hire back, we gotta surge back the staff across the federal government that's gonna help us get this done. And the president's fiscal year 24 budget that just came, came out this past month helps us start to do that work. So that's one. The second is the process efficiencies of just doing the analysis in a way that's gonna, you know, not everybody doing it on their own, maybe single approach to get efficiencies that way.

But then, and this is why I think we get, you know, slowed down. So there's this thing called interconnection. You build a solar farm and that last, you know, little bit to connect it to the grid, it requires real upgrades. And there's a big conversation all around the country of who's gonna pay for that upgrade. Should they pay for all of the upgrade, should the rate payers pay for some of it? Again, this is another set of conversations where we're gonna have to be very sensitive to low and moderate income folks. We've gotta have processes that engage a bunch of stakeholders, but we gotta make the decision quickly. We gotta move forward, we gotta build this stuff.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. Coming up, how to get ALL the major players to participate in decarbonizing our world:

Ali Zaidi: So, the way I think about it is there are big chunks of the economy that for a long time have thought either this was not their challenge or maybe they weren't the ones that were called upon in this moment to be part of the solution set.

Well, with every sector, every segment of the economy, I think our call to them has been to say, actually it's on you too.

Greg Dalton: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. Let's get back to my conversation with White House National Climate Advisor Ali Zaidi.

The White House visitor logs are released periodically and recently it was noted that John Podesta, who works in the White House, met with the CEO of Exxon. I asked Ali Zaidi to share the administration's approach toward working with such fossil fuel super majors.

Ali Zaidi: We've gotta engage with folks in every sector of the economy. Recently we had all of the CEOs. From steel, cement and aluminum, around a table at the White House. We also, by the way, had the head of the AFL-CIO and the number two person from the United Steel Workers. And those guys pollute a lot.

Greg Dalton: They're hard to decarbonize sectors.

Ali Zaidi: They pollute a lot. But you know what, the way we're gonna change that sector is by having the hard conversation saying, Hey guys, for a really long time. We looked at you and we said you were hard to decarbonize, maybe even impossible to decarbonize. In the Obama administration, when they set the climate goal, it was 85% emissions reductions by 2050. We've set a net zero. They said 85% in the Obama administration, or I guess we said 85% in the Obama administration. That meant there was a big chunk of the economy that was probably just gonna sort of keep going the way it was.

Well, now things have changed. We got technologies, material science has progressed. We've got hydrogen capture, other technologies that mean we can deliver clean steel, zero carbon, right? I went to a place in Toledo where there was once a brownfield. Now they're producing 50% cleaner steel than would've been imported from China.

So we had that hard conversation and we said, you're on notice guys, and you have to be part of the solution. So, the way I think about it is there are big chunks of the economy that for a long time have thought either this was not their challenge or maybe they weren't the ones that were called upon in this moment to be part of the solution set.

Well, with every sector, every segment of the economy, I think our call to them has been to say, actually it's on you too. And you know, we've done this with everybody including, I remember first few months on the job, we had every single airline CEO and we said, we need like real plans, right? Sustainable aviation fuels is not pie in the sky. It's a real thing that can get pumped into your plane. And so what they said to us was, we need a tax credit because there's some cost that needs to come off. So we went and passed it. Game on.

Greg Dalton: Right. So many good things happening, across that the inflation reduction Act, though this transition to a cleaner economy will create 14 million new jobs by 2030, according to the IEA, at the same time, 5 million fossil fuel workers could lose their jobs. 14 minus 5, that's still 9 million net gain of new jobs. But if you're in that 5 million, you're, you know, talking about potential losers there. So what are you, you've mentioned a little bit, what are you doing specifically for those people, those 5 million people who feel threatened and afraid and they're fighting this transition cuz they're scared.

Ali Zaidi: Yeah. Folks, remember the yellow jackets in France?

Greg Dalton: Sure. The fuel protests.

Ali Zaidi: Right? So there was, you know, climate policy that was enacted in France and then all of a sudden folks came to the streets wearing yellow jackets being really frustrated. The way I think about this is we're either gonna have our workers wearing the hard hats inside the factory making the clean energy solutions, or they're gonna be really ticked off.

And I think the fundamental transformation in the way we've approached this in the Biden administration, and we benefit from the fact that the clean energy economy has started to really scale, is we don't talk about these green jobs like there are these, you know, jobs on another planet. Cause you go talk to folks in the union hall about green jobs. They said, come on man, like, I want a real job. And --

Greg Dalton: They don't pay union wages.

Ali Zaidi: Yeah. And instead what we've started to do is go and look at the literal work that needs to be done. So, the pipefitters and plumbers that have been building these pipes for decades, well, they're actually front of the line pushing for stronger methane standards because they get to patch those pipes, right? We've got the electrical workers who've been keeping the lights on across the country for as long as we can remember. Those folks are front of the line on electric vehicle chargers because they're the ones that are getting to put the wiring in to make that possible. You got the United Auto Workers who used to make internal combustion engine and they said, gee, I don't know about this shift. Well, they're at the table helping us transform the industry because we worked really hard to make sure we're growing that supply chain here in the United States. The first joint venture between a battery company and a Detroit auto firm. The Altium facility in Lordstown, Ohio, it's gone union. So we gotta go sector by sector. We gotta look at the literal work that we need to do. And it's gonna turn out that a lot of these workers with amazing skills who've been holding up and expanding middle class communities across the country, we need them in the clean energy economy. We just need to be thoughtful about it. And I think with President Biden, that's core to the way he's approached climate, he sees this as part of his blue collar blueprint for America, the way to restore dignity, uh, and respect to workers who busted their tail building this country from the ground up.

Greg Dalton: On Capitol Hill, there's growing chatter about a carbon tariff led by the GOP that would add a fee for imported products based on their carbon content. How do you feel about a carbon tariff?

Ali Zaidi: You know, I think that it's really important that we have a level playing field at our shores. We're asking our industry to clean itself up, right? Today, we have now on the books standards that help us reduce methane emissions, hydrofluorocarbon emissions, cross state air pollution emissions, things that contribute to ozone particulate matter, and that means our industry is cleaning up. We need the rest of the world to do the same thing, right?

We don't want to flood in dirty products from overseas. And so I think there are gonna be

different approaches to how to do that. But on the border mechanisms, you know, the president brokered the first real trade deal around carbon emissions embodied in products with the EU on steel and aluminum.

And that's getting, the details are getting worked out, but the first ever carbon border arrangement around steel and aluminum. So, you know, I think that's gonna be an approach, I think buy-clean programs at the state and federal level that incentivize clean products. That's gonna be important. But we should be in the market for all solutions.

Greg Dalton: In the last Congress, senators Todd Young, Republican of Indiana and Brian Shatz, democratic from Hawaii introduced the Yes in My Backyard Act, attempting to tackle discriminatory land policies that you mentioned and do away with some regulation that prevents housing projects from moving forward. So how big a priority is this? Is this a live issue? Cause most land use decisions are made at the local level. You know, that you worked for New York in New York state. Is there a federal role here for opening up doors to more housing where there's a real shortage crisis nationwide?

Ali Zaidi: I mean, at the very least, I think it's really important for federal leaders to use the power of the bully pulpit to talk about the incredible, economic proposition that we have here. And the equity imperative that we have, to make sure that we're advancing policy that helps us re-level the playing field in a lot of these communities. so yeah, you know, I think that we need, progress at every level of government. And that means that local officials are gonna have to be inventive on zoning policy. They're gonna be, have to be inventive on building codes that's within the local domain. They're gonna be, have to be inventive on training programs, connecting people with resources to get into this workforce. But, you know, I think for too long there's been a dereliction of duty in government.

It's why we've got all of this baggage to deal with. I was born the year, the first year the world hit 350 parts per million. So there's been a really long period of time when people have just been watching it go from 350, 375, 400 and so on. You know, I think what we're called on in this moment is to see if we can take action in a way that's decisive, that's bold, that's monumental, that's inclusive, that's equitable, that's sustainable and durable, that's accelerating. And that reframes this from a conversation about doom and despair into a conversation about hope and possibilities.

Greg Dalton: We recorded this conversation with White House National Climate Advisor Ali Zaidi with a live audience at the Commonwealth Club of California. At the end we invited a few questions from the audience. Annie Leonard, co-executive director of Greenpeace USA, had this one:

Annie Leonard: In 2020, the climate movement did an unprecedented get out the climate vote effort. Greenpeace threw down like we never had before, reaching literally millions of high climate, low propensity voters. And in that effort it was really hard cause a lot of them felt skeptical and said, you know, the pledges don't mean anything, their vote doesn't matter. And we rallied the troops and we got out the climate vote and we helped President Biden win. What do we say to them now going into 2024 when we go back and say, we need your climate vote? And they talk about the no drilling on federal lands. Period. Period, period.

What do we say to get those climate voters excited to get out the climate vote again?

Ali Zaidi: Well, first of all, I think right now, And certainly every day of this administration, I've started the morning by just saying a thank you to folks who have, and I, by the way, am a climate voter, but to the folks who helped not only elect the president but elect a Congress that was able to enact the sort of change that we saw, I think here's what you tell 'em. Number one, the combination of the Inflation Reduction Act and the bipartisan infrastructure law represent a gigaton of emissions reduction potential. They're putting us on track to cut our emissions in half by the end of this decade, not some future time far away. The Inflation Reduction Act on its own is 10 times larger than any bill that Congress has ever enacted on climate change 10 times bigger. So if you're used to taking two feet stride. Think about a 20 foot leap, right? It's a dramatic change in the level of ambition. The amount of investment into environmental justice used to get measured in millions of dollars. I used to work in the budget office and the Obama Biden administration. We, between these two bills, are investing over a hundred billion dollars into environmental justice, the largest ever investment in Superfund and Brownfield cleanup, a climate bank, 27 billion aimed to create opportunities specifically in disadvantaged communities.

And this stuff isn't like change way far on the horizon. The amount of investment we've seen triggered by this policy means that by 2030 the US will be capable of producing 13 million electric vehicles worth of batteries. That's a really big deal. We sold 16 million vehicles total last year. So think about the pace of the transformation. We have increased, by the end of his first term, we will have increased our ability to manufacture solar panels by eight x. We're conserving land. We are dealing in the agriculture sector. 60,000 farms, 25 million acres of farmland in the US signed up for climate smart agriculture. So, you know, if you're a climate voter in 2020, you did what everyone bet against was possible for decades, what had seemed completely out of reach, that every single sector of the economy would be now lined up with irresistible economics driving towards decarbonization, and that we'd be doing it in a way that's centered around workers and communities and justice. I don't know what greater evidence there is of democratic power in propelling a system that had run on emissions for decades towards decarbonization. I don't know what greater evidence there is of the power of people organizing in that moment.

Greg Dalton: And as we look to '24, it reminds me of during the 2020 election, I sat here with Jay Inslee and Tom Steyer, who were the climate candidates in that campaign. They had the boldest plans at a time when the Democrats were trying to outdo each other. And Joe Biden was the moderate guy who wasn't gonna do very much, right? Let's admit it. Biden's climate plan was not exciting anybody. It was Steyer and Insley. If you'd said to me, we'd be sitting here today in '23 with billions and billions and dollars, all this done, I wouldn't have believed you. So just little perspective and thank you very much for coming here.

Ali Zaidi: But let me, can I just say, the same president that got to go give a State of the Union address and say, I delivered on climate in 1986? In 1987, he was the same guy who was in the United States Congress trying to advance and did advance. The first piece of climate legislation. So yes, we had an incredibly healthy debate in the Democratic primary. I think it lifted everybody's ambition, by the way. I think the movement and the young people did the most in lifting our sites and helping us see the possibility. But we got a good guy in

the Oval Office who's delivering.

Greg Dalton: Got a good guy here advising him. Thank you.

Ali Zaidi: Thank you very much.

Greg Dalton: On this Climate One... We've been talking with White House National Climate Advisor Ali Zaidi.

Greg Dalton: Climate One's empowering conversations connect all aspects of the climate emergency. To hear more, subscribe wherever you get your pods. Talking about climate can be hard-- AND it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. You can also help by sending a link to this episode to a friend. By sharing you can help people have their own deeper climate conversations.

Brad Marshland is our senior producer; Our managing director is Jenny Park. Our producers and audio editors are Ariana Brocius and Austin Colón. Megan Bisciegia is our production manager. Wency Shaida is our development manager. Our theme music was composed by George Young (and arranged by Matt Willcox). Gloria Duffy is CEO of The Commonwealth Club of California, the nonprofit and nonpartisan forum where our program originates. I'm Greg Dalton.