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What Wyoming shows about going 'carbon negative' in coal country

By Jason Plautz | 12/05/2023 06:48 AM EST



Wyoming Gov. Mark Gordon (R) on Capitol Hill in 2021. Francis Chung/E&E News

Wyoming is highlighting a question at the center of the nation's electricity mix: Can a coal state go "carbon negative"?

Republican Gov. Mark Gordon's stated goal for the nation's top-producing coal state is to suck more carbon out of the air than it emits. It has been framed both as a sky-high target to launch renewable energy and a potential middle ground strategy that can keep coal plants alive.

But as the plan — which Gordon first announced in 2021 — gains national attention, the state GOP is pushing back. Republicans issued a rare rebuke of Gordon over his climate change statements, raising new questions about the viability of the carbon negative goal — and how much political power Gordon will have to see it through.

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The Wyoming debate comes as some Republicans nationally are moving away from challenges to climate science and toward recognizing the role of heavy industry and fossil fuels in cutting emissions and battling climate change. A [delegation \(https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/11/30/republicans-at-cop28-to-focus-on-emissions-drop-fossil-fuels-00129205\)](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/11/30/republicans-at-cop28-to-focus-on-emissions-drop-fossil-fuels-00129205) of House Republicans (<https://www.eenews.net/articles/republicans-at-cop28-to-focus-on-emissions-drop-fossil-fuels/>) to the U.N. climate summit in the United Arab Emirates, for example, is expected to tout the role natural gas has played in lowering emissions.

Karly Matthews, vice president of communications for the American Conservation Coalition, which represents young Republicans concerned about climate change, said the group was “encouraged” to see a Republican governor speaking forcefully about climate change.

“It’s so important to bring traditional energy communities along and empower them in the energy transition,” Matthews said. “We need practical solutions like carbon capture and nuclear energy. A Republican governor talking about those strategies encourages those communities and makes climate action seem more approachable.”

Gordon's plight, however, shows the precariousness of that position in traditional coal states that are at ground zero of the energy transition.

The Wyoming Republican Party issued a vote of no confidence in Gordon in November, calling his climate change policies part of a “Socialist agenda.” Members of the state's Freedom Caucus have hammered Gordon over it and organized a letter signed by 30 legislators and the state's elected secretary of state challenging Gordon to a debate over the issue.

“A ‘carbon negative’ Wyoming means cold homes in the winter, unaffordable food prices, and 1970s-era gas lines — economy-wide,” state Rep. John Bear (R), who heads Wyoming's Freedom Caucus, said in an email.

“I believe that Governor Gordon has chosen to manage the decline of our legacy industries rather than fight the religion of climate change that is erroneously portending doom for industries that are required for everything from plastics to steel, and from heating to air conditioning,” Bear added.

According to data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Wyoming's coal industry employment was down 13 percent in 2022 compared with 2018, when Gordon was first elected.

Gordon turned down the debate request, [writing in a letter \(https://subscriber.politicopro.com/eenews/f/eenews/?id=0000018c-218c-d8a7-a99f-f3dce2270000\)](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/eenews/f/eenews/?id=0000018c-218c-d8a7-a99f-f3dce2270000) to members of the Legislature that comments about his climate stance have been “either craven misrepresentations of my record on the topic for venal political gain or complete ignorance of my commitment to defend our core industries against all comers regardless of national climate policy.”

Gordon has said climate change is real and caused by human activity. He also said the debate over CO2 and a warming Earth has raged for decades.

“So rather than join the unfruitfulness of that fray, and recognizing that, alas, one side of that argument currently holds most of the levers of regulation, I have sought to position our industries as competitively as a practical and more proximate way to attain the stated objective of reducing CO2 in the atmosphere without also putting people out of a job,” the governor said.

Gordon has reiterated his position in public appearances since the vote of no confidence. At the Western Governors' Association meeting in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Gordon talked up opportunities to work with other states on clean-emitting technologies.

Gordon was first elected in 2018 and gained reelection in 2022 with about 74 percent of the vote. He has consistently rated as one of the nation's most popular governors in a deep red state, despite frequently being at odds with Donald Trump, the former president and Republican frontrunner for next year's GOP presidential nomination.

Michael Pearlman, a Gordon spokesperson, said the governor has long tried to strike a position that addresses climate change without harming the economy.

“Capturing CO2 emissions through carbon capture and augmenting that with better management of our natural resources offers a means to reduce CO2 in our atmosphere without sacrificing the jobs, careers and revenues that have built Wyoming,” Pearlman said in an email.

Chasing 'carbon negative'

Gordon's goal for Wyoming — which is nonbinding and does not have a timeline attached — stands out from the pledges other governors have made for their own states. Instead of calling for certain levels of clean energy or vowing to convert every economic sector to electricity or clean-burning fuels, Gordon wants the state to lead the way in sucking carbon dioxide out of the air.

To do that, Gordon has promoted technologies like carbon capture systems for coal- and gas-fueled plants and direct air capture facilities. Those technologies are still unproven at scale, but could offer a boost to the state's existing fossil fuel infrastructure. Gordon has also said that the state could manufacture asphalt or other products from captured carbon, or import carbon dioxide from across state lines and store it underground.

In 2022, coal accounted for 71 percent of Wyoming's electricity net generation, according to the Energy Information Administration. That's the highest share of any state outside of West Virginia. Wind power accounted for another 22 percent in Wyoming last year, with total generation more than doubling since 2019.

According to EIA data, Wyoming's power sector was responsible for 54.6 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions in 2021, down almost 2 percent from 2019 but still the 18th most of any state.

But experts say Wyoming is a state ripe for clean energy, especially as coal's fortunes decline nationally. The Department of Energy's [Wind Energy Technologies Office \(https://windexchange.energy.gov/maps-data/321\)](https://windexchange.energy.gov/maps-data/321) said Wyoming has the potential to produce as much as 472,000 megawatts of wind power, the fifth most of any state. EIA data analyzed by Environment America found that

Wyoming could produce 374 times its electricity demand in 2020 from solar power alone and 108 times its demand from the wind.

Kyle Clark-Sutton, a manager with the U.S. Program at RMI — a nonprofit that promotes a move to cleaner energy — said that Wyoming has an “exciting opportunity to take advantage of the full toolbox,” including carbon capture, but that the state should focus on the path of least resistance.

Carbon capture carries significant questions about effectiveness and cost. A [recent U.N. Environment Programme report \(https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/11/21/un-report-highlights-risks-to-over-reliance-on-carbon-removal-00128120\)](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/11/21/un-report-highlights-risks-to-over-reliance-on-carbon-removal-00128120) also cautioned that an “overly-optimistic dependence” on future carbon removal could distract from near-term reduction efforts.

“We need to reduce emissions as much and as fast as possible, and we shouldn’t take any options off the table,” Clark-Sutton said. “But we should be really clear-eyed about what are the most cost-effective options, which are wind and solar power.”

The state has added potential thanks to last year’s Inflation Reduction Act, which offers additional tax credits for projects built in “energy communities,” including areas that have historically hosted coal mines or coal-fired power plants, or where the economy is dependent on fossil fuels. [Almost all of Wyoming qualifies \(https://arcgis.netl.doe.gov/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=a2ce47d4721a477a8701bd0e08495e1d\)](https://arcgis.netl.doe.gov/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=a2ce47d4721a477a8701bd0e08495e1d), making clean energy construction there even more attractive.

While Gordon has promoted renewable energy development, heralding it as an export opportunity, he is especially bullish on carbon capture and storage as well as direct air capture.

Wyoming hosts a national testing center for carbon capture at the Dry Fork Station, a coal plant in the northeast of the state. Gordon has also signed a memorandum of understanding with Colorado Gov. Jared Polis (D) to collaborate on direct air capture, including applying for grants and exploring ways for the industry to work across state lines.

A 2020 state law also requires that coal plant operators explore installing carbon capture as an alternative to shutting them down. Utilities that cannot show that carbon capture would have been too expensive and decommission a plant ahead of schedule would not be allowed to put replacement power costs in Wyoming ratepayer bills.

A proposed state Senate bill would extend the deadline for that program from 2030 to 2038. The bill will be considered by lawmakers in the spring.

Whether utilities pick up on the state’s goal also remains to be seen. Rocky Mountain Power, the PacifiCorp subsidiary that serves about 144,000 Wyoming customers, does not include carbon capture in its long-range plans. PacifiCorp anticipates that systemwide carbon dioxide emissions will be down 46 percent compared to 2005 in 2026, 90 percent in 2035 and 100 percent in 2050.

Black Hills Energy, which serves nearly 45,000 electric customers in Wyoming, also has plans to slash emissions 70 percent of 2005 levels by 2040, but likewise does not include carbon capture in its sustainability plan. The company is conducting a feasibility study on hydrogen generation.

It all adds up to a strategy that will keep Wyoming’s coal industry humming while also reducing emissions, according to Pearlman, the spokesperson for Gordon.

“All in all, this approach to promoting our legacy industries while welcoming new technologies and opportunities might be called ‘carbon negative’ to simplify the phrase ‘Reducing Carbon Dioxide in the atmosphere using new technologies appropriate to Wyoming,’” he said.

A political touchpoint

Although Gordon first announced the carbon negative goal in 2021, it was thrust back into the spotlight in October during an appearance at Harvard University. In a speech there, Gordon said it was “clear that we have a warming climate” and that “carbon dioxide is a major contributor to that challenge.”

That appearance triggered a rebuke from Park County’s Republican Party, which represents an area in the northwest corner of Wyoming, and eventually the state’s Republican Party in the form of a no-confidence vote. That is essentially a measure of disapproval and is less serious than a censure.

The party did not respond to a request for comment on why it issued the vote of no confidence now.

The disapproval came as the state Legislature is weighing the impact of high energy bills on residents. Lawmakers met last month to endorse a package of bills in response to Rocky Mountain Power’s recent request to state regulators to increase bills by nearly 30 percent.

Among the legislation that lawmakers on a state committee advanced are requirements that the state define “adequate, dispatchable and reliable” electricity; that regulators scrutinize utility spending that does not directly benefit Wyoming; and changes to the way utilities seek bids for new generation. Those will not come before the full Legislature until February, when lawmakers return.

In public testimony, some utilities and environmentalists expressed concern that the measures could hurt renewable energy. Rocky Mountain Power’s rates, for example, include payments to fund PacifiCorp’s interstate transmission spending to spread renewable energy across the region.

Despite the posture of many elected officials, some people in Wyoming are embracing the potential of renewable energy. Earlier this year, Carbon County [marked the opening](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/07/19/how-wyomings-carbon-county-came-to-embrace-renewable-energy-00104599) of a landmark transmission line that will carry power from a nearby wind farm — one of several massive renewables projects Wyoming is building to export power elsewhere.

Gordon’s stance has even won plaudits from some Democrats in the state. Theresa Livingston, the Democrat who ran against Gordon in 2022, said in an interview that climate change didn’t come up much on the trail. But she said she is “so glad Governor Gordon is speaking out about it.”

Bear, the Freedom Caucus chair, says he’s not looking to up the ante on Gordon — unless he abandons the state’s fossil fuel legacy. That’s why he’s looking for a debate — and a chance to clear the air.

“A cordial and honest debate on this issue is what the entire nation needs, and considering the differences of opinion here in the Cowboy State, we deserve to have a conversation about it,” Bear said.

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