

Manchin on fracking, climate and a clean energy standard

Jeremy Dillon, E&E News reporter Published: Friday, January 15, 2021



Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) is preparing to become chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee. Francis Chung/E&E News

The senator who once put a bullet through the Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill for a campaign ad will become an even more important gatekeeper on climate change this year.

West Virginia Democrat Joe Manchin will take over the Energy and Natural Resources Committee as soon as next week as his party promises to push increasingly ambitious ideas against global warming.

Manchin helped pass three bipartisan energy and public lands bills in the last Congress with outgoing Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska). The ENR Committee achieved bipartisan success, even as Capitol Hill devolved into further partisan gridlock.

"We did a lot, but there is still a lot in energy we want to get done," Manchin said in an interview with E&E News yesterday.

Incoming Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), in a letter to colleagues this week, promised "bold legislation to defeat the climate crisis by investing in clean infrastructure and manufacturing."

At the center of those discussions is Manchin, a longtime defender of his state's coal industry and an "all of the above" energy strategy, who has also worked to make inroads with environmentalists.

Manchin spoke with E&E News about his vision for the committee, including his views on clean energy standard legislation and taking care of communities displaced by climate rules.

He also weighed in on President-elect Joe Biden's Energy secretary pick Jennifer Granholm, the former Michigan governor, and Interior secretary pick Rep. Deb Haaland (D-N.M.).

You've cleared the decks with a busy December. As you take over as chairman, what are your priorities and agenda for the upcoming Congress?

We did a lot, but there is still a lot in energy we want to get done. We couldn't get everything done in the comprehensive plan that we had, so we will be looking at that, the things that we could not get accomplished, and see if we can package that and carry that across the finish line.

Also, the energy transition across these communities. You cannot leave people behind. I have said that all along, so we are going to be pushing hard on the 48C clean manufacturing tax credit.

As we transition, we are going to be advocating for tax credits and extenders and all things we use as incentives.

So if it's going to be a new form of energy or energy efficiency, that as we replace and the markets shift and the jobs that would be eliminated because of that, those extenders, incentives and credits should be required to be used in areas that have lost the absolute most jobs. That's all we are saying. Don't leave anybody behind.

We are going to talk about the Paris Agreement. We feel very strongly about that, but we have to look at what's going on around the world.

We want the Paris Agreement to be in a way that puts equal footing with other countries. China isn't even going to reach peak emissions until 2030. They are a developed nation, they have the second strongest economy in the world, they could be on the same timetable as we all are.

We should be treating and using our trading policies to incentivize some of the other countries to use some of the technologies that we perfected, so we'll be advocating for that.

And clean energy standards. It's going to be in the details. We need to ensure the goals and standards are in line with the technologies available.

You can't be aspirational and set targets when the technology has not even been developed or proven. So we are looking for a commonsense process.

That sounds like you are open to the idea of a clean energy standard?

Oh, yeah, we are open to everything on that. The bottom line is, though, when you are doing the things we are doing, you have to do it in a way that you don't create one vast economic depression on the price of coal because another one has opened up with opportunities.

You have to make sure we are sending the opportunities to the areas that have basically carried us. I've always said this, you don't want people to feel like they are the returning Vietnam veterans. They have done everything you have asked them to do. They have fought every war and they have done all the heavy lifting, and now they are persona non grata.

A number of investor-owned utilities are setting a net-zero, carbon-free or similar goals by 2050 or sooner on their own. These carbon reduction goals may be more achievable than we realized. Things are moving at warp speed. They really are.

Let me make sure you understand where I am coming from. I am an all-in energy person. I want to use all the resources we have. My first and foremost thing on this Energy Committee is to do everything I can to maintain energy independence in the United States of America.

And then we can show the world how to clean up the climate by using them with the technology that we can be developing and innovation technology that needs to be done. I think the bill we passed in the omnibus bill is a tremendous step in that investment. That's the way we should be going.

The first item on your agenda is going to be these nominations. What is your first impression? How quickly can you move them? Are you at all worried about Republican opposition?

I haven't talked to my Republican counterparts about this because people have just been announced.

But Jennifer Granholm is someone I have known for a long time. She is really a good person, very smart person and someone who is workable.

Jennifer understands — she's a former governor, and I'm a little partial to former governors, as you know. Jennifer is really a sharp lady.

She might have a little bit different ideas, and they are going to go back and say she said this, this and this. The bottom line is that Jennifer is someone I can work with. And she is responsible and she is reasonable, and we have had good conversations.

I've always been deferential to whoever an executive branch person puts forward. When President Trump put his people up, sometimes I was the only Democrat voting for some of his nominees. I've always felt this way.

These are large organizations we are asking these people to head up. They have to have some organizational skills and experience, but I'll be deferential and try to help every one of Joe's appointees or recommendations unless we see something different. And if we do, I'll be an honest broker and call him and tell him. I haven't seen that yet.

I've just spoken to Deb Haaland. I don't know Deb Haaland, but I look forward to meeting her. I had a nice conversation with her, and she seems like a very good and sincere person.

She has a little bit different agenda than us, but her and I spoke about that. I want to make sure the Interior Department is able to continue to contribute as it always has to our country.

Are you worried at all about this fracking ban on public lands, whether it could affect Haaland's nomination or could it be too heavy-handed on the part of the Biden administration to meet Biden's campaign priority?

I think Joe Biden understands that there is going to be fracking in this country if we are to be energy independent, and there is a better, cleaner way of doing it. We have to capture the methane. We shouldn't just sit back and say it's acceptable.

I think [a fracking ban] would be detrimental to her or anyone else who says you are just going to eliminate something.

I'll say this, we can innovate it. But to just say eliminating things because you don't like it or don't think it can be done, that's not the American way and it's not the American spirit.

When do you think you can have confirmation hearings on the two?

I intend to do them as quickly as possible. I have to work with my ranking member, John Barrasso, on that. John and I are friends, and we are going to sit down and talk about this. But I think we need to get these done as soon as possible.

That was my concern about an impeachment trial. I've been through an impeachment trial, and if you put the trial on with the evidence, the defense and prosecution side, and everybody speaks, it takes awhile to get all the facts out and get the evidence out. This is pretty clear-cut and only one count, so maybe it will go quickly.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.