

# Trump signs executive orders to help dying U.S. coal industry

*The president directed agencies to boost coal leasing, mining and exports. But these steps are unlikely to usher in a coal renaissance.*

**By Maxine Joselow, Jake Spring and Michael Birnbaum  
Washington Post**

President [Donald Trump](#) signed four executive orders Tuesday aimed at boosting the U.S. coal industry, which has been in dramatic decline for decades, displaced by cheaper natural gas and the rise of renewable energy.

Flanked by more than two-dozen coal miners wearing hard hats at the White House, Trump directed federal agencies to loosen various restrictions on coal mining, leasing and exports. He instructed the Interior Department to resume coal leasing on millions of acres of public lands, and he ordered the Energy Department and other agencies to study whether more coal-fired power plants can supply electricity for [artificial-intelligence data centers](#).

However, these actions are [unlikely to usher in a coal renaissance](#). Domestic coal production has declined dramatically in recent years as U.S. natural gas production has boomed, and technological innovation has slashed the cost of renewable energy.

The executive orders build on moves the Trump administration has already taken. The Environmental Protection Agency last month [began the process of dismantling](#) restrictions on coal plants' carbon emissions, mercury pollution and wastewater runoff. The Interior Department [approved an expansion](#) of a Montana coal mine, and the Bureau of Land Management is [considering an "emergency" lease](#) to mine coal in North Dakota.

Trump on Tuesday also directed agencies to prevent aging coal plants from closing and to fast-track the permitting process for new coal mines on federal lands. And he said the Justice Department would investigate state policies aimed at phasing out coal to fight climate change, although it was unclear what

authorities the agency would invoke. The agency did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

“This is a very important day to me because we’re bringing back an industry that was abandoned, despite the fact that it was just about the best, and certainly the best in terms of power, real power,” Trump said before signing the executive orders.

“I call it beautiful, clean coal,” he added. “We’re ending Joe Biden’s war on beautiful, clean coal, once and for all.”

The White House event’s attendees included several Republican lawmakers from coal-producing states, such as Sen. Jim Justice (R-West Virginia), whose family owns coal mines, and Rep. Troy Downing (R-Montana), who brought a white paper bag full of what he called “clean coal” from the only underground mine in his state.

Although the phrase “clean coal” is popular among Trump’s allies, coal is the dirtiest fossil fuel. It produces more planet-warming carbon-dioxide emissions than natural gas when burned, and few companies are using the nascent technology that captures these emissions and stores them deep underground.

While Trump failed to boost the coal industry in his first term, this time the market has shifted. Electric utilities are predicting that energy demand will skyrocket as tech companies ramp up construction of AI data centers. Meanwhile, electricity authorities worry that shutting down coal plants could undercut the reliability of the nation’s power grid as climate change fuels more frequent and intense heat waves, winter storms and other extreme weather events.

While few in the industry envision new coal plants being built, existing plants are seeing their lives extended. In the past three years, at least 40 coal-fired power plants delayed their closures, according to data compiled by the National Mining Association, an industry lobbying group.

The association praised Trump for reversing what it called the Biden administration’s “hostility” toward fossil fuels.

“Today’s reported executive actions by President Trump clearly prioritize how to responsibly keep the lights on, recognize the enormous strategic value of

American mined coal and embrace the economic opportunity that comes from American energy abundance,” Rich Nolan, the association’s president, said in a statement. “It’s a stark shift from the prior administration’s punitive regulatory agenda, hostile energy policies and unlawful land grabs.”

The Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, criticized the executive orders for propping up an industry that it said harms public health and drives climate change.

“Trump tried this gambit in his last term. We fought it every step of the way — and it failed,” said Kit Kennedy, the group’s managing director for power. “With the gains made by solar, wind and battery power since then, bailing out coal makes even less sense today.”

As president, Joe Biden made phasing out fossil fuels, including coal, a centerpiece of his [ambitious climate agenda](#). Under Biden, the Interior Department announced an [end to new coal leasing](#) in the Powder River Basin, which produces nearly half the coal in the United States, while the Environmental Protection Agency finalized [regulations](#) that would have pushed existing coal plants to cut the majority of their emissions by 2039 or close.

In contrast, Trump’s EPA last month announced that coal plants and other polluting facilities could email the agency to request an exemption from pollution controls under the Clean Air Act, saying such a move was justified if technology to implement the standards is unavailable and it is in the interest of national security. Montana’s Colstrip coal plant, one of the most polluting in the country, has already applied for such an exemption from controls on its emissions of mercury and other toxins, according to the state’s congressional delegation.

While Trump made coal central to his first campaign, a coal revival never materialized during his first term. A boom in hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, flooded the market with cheap natural gas, while construction of new coal plants ground to a halt.

U.S. coal output tumbled 32 percent from 2017 to 2024, according to the U.S. [Energy Information Administration](#). The Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal campaign contends that 383 U.S. coal plants have closed down or been proposed to retire. About 200 remain, with 175 generating significant electricity, according to the EIA.