

Telework is better for the planet, federal union argues

Analysis by [Maxine Joselow](#)

with research by [Vanessa Montalbano](#)

February 22, 2023 at 7:16 a.m. EST

Good morning and welcome to The Climate 202! [Happy Mlemsday](#).

Reading this online? [Sign up for The Climate 202 to get scoops and sharp analysis in your inbox each morning.](#)

In today's edition, we'll cover the **Environmental Protection Agency's** decision to take control of the response to the Ohio train derailment and the **International Energy Agency's** warning about high methane emissions. But first:

The largest federal union cites climate concerns in opposing a return-to-office push

Rep. James Comer (R-Ky.) and D.C. Mayor **Muriel E. Bowser** (D) don't see eye-to-eye on much. But [they agree](#) that federal employees should return to the office.

The House this month passed a [bill](#) from Comer, who chairs the **Oversight and Accountability Committee**, that would require federal agencies to return to their pre-pandemic office arrangements within 30 days. Meanwhile, Bowser used her [third inaugural address](#) in January to call for federal workers to help revitalize downtown D.C.

In response to this bipartisan push, the largest federal union is airing this argument: Telework is better for the planet. In particular, the American Federation of Government Employees points to research showing that telework [curbs climate pollution](#) caused by commuting in gas-powered cars.

“We all know that personal automobiles are responsible for a tremendous amount of pollution through the burning of fossil fuels,” AFGE public policy director **Jacque Simon** told The Climate 202. “So every car trip not taken has an environmental benefit.”

Transportation accounts for about a quarter of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. And the vast majority of employees across the country — 81.8 percent — commute to work in a private vehicle, according to the **Census Bureau**.

In 2021, President Biden issued an executive order calling for the federal government to become carbon-neutral by 2050. Emissions from federal employees’ commutes to and from the office are counted under this goal.

At the EPA

To be clear, Comer’s bill has little chance of passing the Democratic-controlled Senate, and Bowser doesn’t have authority over federal employees. But the two politicians have still increased pressure on the Biden administration to order federal workers back to the office.

That pressure has “unsettled” many employees at the **Environmental Protection Agency** who recognize the climate benefits of telework, in addition to the benefits for their work-life balance, said **Bethany Dreyfus**, president of **AFGE Local 1236**, which represents employees in EPA Region 9.

“So many of us work on reducing emissions in our daily jobs at the EPA,” Dreyfus told The Climate 202. “So to be able to do that not only through our work, but how we get to work, is really important.”

Under existing government-wide guidance, agencies’ plans for telework can vary based on their unique mission, workforce and operations. And under a 2021 deal that Dreyfus helped negotiate with the EPA, all employees are required to have “portable work,” or work that can be performed outside the office. There are exceptions for jobs that require in-person work, such as those involving the maintenance of equipment.

The EPA did not immediately respond to an inquiry about the share of employees who regularly telework.

The other side

Proponents of the return to office argue that federal employees can play a crucial role in revitalizing downtown D.C., which is still struggling with the absence of many people now working from home.

- From February 2020 to March 2022, more than 2,300 businesses moved away from downtown D.C., according to a recent Washington Post analysis.
- In her inaugural address, Bowser noted that the federal government owns or leases a third of Washington’s office space. “We need decisive action by the White House to either get most federal workers back to the office most of the time or to realign their vast property holdings for use by the local government, by nonprofits, by businesses and by any user willing to revitalize it,” Bowser said.

On Tuesday around noon, a handful of customers sat at tables inside **TimGad Café**, an eatery next to EPA headquarters serving sandwiches and salads. **Sophia DeDeaux**, who has worked as the cafe's closing manager since 2018, told The Climate 202 that "things have been a lot quieter" since the start of the pandemic.

The cafe closed for about a year during covid, she added, and it has reduced its hours since reopening.

The climate impact

Still, experts say federal employee telework can help curb climate pollution — with a few important caveats.

The Climate 202 asked **Gregory Keoleian**, director of the **University of Michigan's Center for Sustainable Systems**, to calculate the effect on emissions if a quarter of all 2.1 million federal employees switched to teleworking regularly.

Keoleian estimated that this could reduce emissions by 750,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide per year. The simplified analysis calculated the emissions reductions that could be achieved from people no longer commuting in gas-powered cars. But the following caveats would apply:

- Not all federal employees commute by car — many take public transit, bike or walk to work.
- Even if federal employees stopped driving to work, they could still hop in the car to run errands. And they would no longer be able to combine these errands with their travel to and from the office.
- While energy consumption in federal buildings would decline, energy consumption in homes could increase, as people heated or cooled their homes to more comfortable temperatures.

Kenneth Gillingham, a professor of economics at **Yale School of the Environment**, suggested a fourth caveat: In the long term, additional telework could cause more people to move farther away from city centers, ultimately increasing car travel.

Despite these uncertainties, Keoleian and Gillingham agreed the emissions savings from telework would be significant from a climate perspective.

"Yes, telework is an important climate action strategy that the federal government can encourage," Keoleian said.

Agency alert

EPA to take control of Ohio derailment response

The **Environmental Protection Agency** said Tuesday it will take control of the response to the Ohio train derailment and order rail company **Norfolk Southern** to clean up the contamination, The Washington Post's **Nick Keppler**, **Justine McDaniel** and **Timothy Puko** report.

“Norfolk Southern will pay for cleaning up the mess that they created and the trauma that they inflicted on this community,” EPA Administrator **Michael Regan** said during a news briefing Tuesday in East Palestine, Ohio, marking his second visit to the site in a week.

The rail company has so far been cleaning up the toxic wreck voluntarily, but Tuesday’s legally binding order requires Norfolk Southern to pay for all remediation costs, participate in public meetings and share information. If the company does not comply, it will be charged triple the costs.

The move marks the Biden administration’s strongest response yet to the incident, which occurred Feb. 3 and released potent chemicals into the air, water and soil. Meanwhile, Transportation Secretary **Pete Buttigieg** said Tuesday the **Transportation Department** will inspect all train routes used for moving hazardous materials and called for the rail industry to implement new safety measures.

Norfolk Southern CEO **Alan Shaw** has promised to clean up the contamination. The company’s representatives skipped a meeting with residents last week. Instead, Shaw published an “open letter” saying the company would stay in East Palestine “for as long as it takes to ensure your safety.”

Pressure points

IEA chief: ‘No excuse’ for high methane emissions

The head of the **International Energy Agency** on Tuesday accused oil and gas companies of doing too little to limit methane emissions and undermining a global agreement to slash methane pollution 30 percent by 2030, the Associated Press reports.

“Methane cuts are among the cheapest options to limit near-term global warming,” IEA Executive Director **Fatih Birol** said in a statement. “There is just no excuse.”

In its annual Methane Gas Tracker report, the agency found that levels of the potent greenhouse gas remained “stubbornly high” in 2022 at 135 million tons, but that 75 percent of those emissions can be reduced using cheap and readily available technologies. Methane traps about 80 times as much heat as carbon dioxide during its first 20 years in the atmosphere and is responsible for about a fifth of all warming.

The report comes after energy giants including **Shell** and **BP** reported record profits as the war in Ukraine continues to drive up oil and gas prices. The agency also accused the fossil fuel sector of refusing to pay the roughly \$100 billion needed for the equipment to initiate the pollution cuts, despite it costing less than 3 percent of overall industry earnings last year.

On the Hill

‘Climate champion’ McClellan wins House race

State **Sen. Jennifer L. McClellan** (D-Richmond) on Tuesday defeated conservative pastor **Leon Benjamin** to become the first Black woman to represent Virginia in Congress, [The Post’s Meagan Flynn and Gregory S. Schneider](#) report.

McClellan, who won the seat that opened after the death of **Rep. A. Donald McEachin** (D-Va.), “is a true climate champion,” **Tiernan Sittenfeld**, senior vice president for government affairs at the **League of Conservation Voters**, said in a statement.

In the Virginia legislature, McClellan introduced and helped pass the state’s 100 percent clean energy law, dubbed the **Virginia Clean Economy Act**. She also sponsored legislation to remove barriers to solar energy, protect waterways from interstate pipelines, and increase electric vehicle charging stations.

Democrats urge EPA to strengthen methane rule

Led by **Sen. Martin Heinrich** (N.M.) and **Rep. Diana DeGette** (Colo.), 76 congressional Democrats are urging the **Environmental Protection Agency** to strengthen its [proposal to regulate methane emissions](#) from U.S. oil and gas operations.

In a [letter](#) dated Feb. 17 and made public this morning, the lawmakers praised the proposal but urged the EPA to go further. In particular, they called on the agency to do more to curb the routine flaring of gas across the country.

“While the supplemental proposal takes some important steps to reduce pollution from routine flaring of gas at oil wells, stricter safeguards against this harmful practice are critical to reduce pollution and protect health,” they wrote.

In the atmosphere

- [A sudden rush to make sustainable aviation fuel mainstream](#) — **David Gelles** for the **New York Times**
- [Wes Moore administration reverses course on Maryland vehicle emissions changes](#) — **Christine Condon** for the **Baltimore Sun**
- [Biden gets chance to redefine World Bank role](#) — **Adam Behsudi, Zack Colman** and **Victoria Guida** for **Politico**
- [Florida’s great displacement](#) — **Jake Bittle** for **Business Insider**

Viral

Washington State Dept. of Natural Resources  
@waDNR · [Follow](#)

One thing your dating inbox and our public lands have in common is they're full of unsolicited trash



2:43 PM · Feb 21, 2023 

[Read the full conversation on Twitter](#)

 3.9K  Reply  Copy link

[Read 62 replies](#)

Thanks for reading!