

John Imes: Federal climate rollback tests Wisconsin's clean energy momentum

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The Trump administration's decision to rescind the Environmental Protection Agency's Endangerment Finding is not just a federal policy shift. It is a transfer of risk. By weakening the legal foundation for regulating climate pollution, Washington is pushing more responsibility onto states, utilities and local communities that must now manage rising energy demand, infrastructure costs and climate impacts with fewer federal guardrails.

The 2009 Endangerment Finding established that greenhouse gases threaten public health and welfare. Courts have upheld that determination repeatedly. Eliminating or weakening it does not change the science behind climate change, but it does change the policy landscape. For Wisconsin, that means greater uncertainty just as the state faces new pressures from artificial intelligence data centers, grid expansion and volatile energy markets.

Wisconsin's clean energy economy has grown quietly but steadily. Renewable projects now generate enough electricity to power about 560,000 homes. Roughly 75,000 residents work in clean energy fields, and more than 350 Wisconsin companies provide products or services that reduce energy use or emissions. These investments are not ideological. They are economic strategies that lower operating costs and improve long-term resilience.

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Local examples illustrate what is at stake. School districts and municipal facilities are cutting energy bills through Focus on Energy efficiency upgrades. Tribal and low-income households are benefiting from weatherization programs that reduce monthly costs. Builders and manufacturers are adopting higher-performance standards because they reduce risk in an uncertain energy market.

Federal rollbacks do not stop these efforts outright, but they make them harder to finance. Investors and utilities rely on predictable rules. When federal standards shift, projects that once looked viable face delays or higher costs.

Meanwhile, Wisconsin's energy debate is being reshaped by proposed hyperscale data centers. Utilities are planning infrastructure expansions to meet unprecedented demand, raising questions about cost allocation, water use and long-term planning. Small businesses, farmers, tribes and rural communities are increasingly asking whether ratepayers will end up subsidizing massive corporate energy users.

That concern drove the Power Wisconsin Forward campaign, supported by the Clean Economy Coalition of Wisconsin and more than 50 partner organizations, to urge the Public Service Commission this past week to ensure that data center growth does not shift costs onto ordinary customers. The issue is not whether innovation should happen. It is whether it happens responsibly.

At the same time, Wisconsin's agricultural sector is advancing methane reduction strategies through anaerobic digesters, renewable natural gas systems and advanced manure management. These projects improve water quality while creating new revenue streams for farmers. Without consistent federal climate policy, fewer of these investments may move forward, slowing innovation that began here.

None of this is occurring in a political vacuum. Recent legislative sessions have shown deep divisions and limited consensus on climate policy. That reality makes federal rollbacks more consequential. Without national guardrails, state regulators and local governments become the front line for decisions about energy affordability, land use and environmental protection.

Legal challenges to the EPA decision are likely, but outcomes remain uncertain. In the meantime, Wisconsin cannot wait for clarity from Washington. Policymakers should focus on practical steps that protect ratepayers and strengthen local

economies: require full cost accountability for large energy users, prioritize efficiency and distributed energy resources before approving new fossil fuel infrastructure, and ensure transparent community engagement before siting major projects.

The core question facing Wisconsin is straightforward. Will the state continue building on investments that already deliver measurable results, or will policy uncertainty slow momentum at the very moment energy demand is accelerating?

Efficiency upgrades reduce utility bills. Community solar keeps energy dollars circulating locally. Methane reduction technologies help farms manage waste while improving soil and water conditions. These are tangible outcomes that should guide policy decisions regardless of federal politics.

What happens next will be determined less by national rhetoric and more by decisions made at the Public Service Commission, in county zoning hearings and in legislative debates at the Capitol. The federal rollback raises real risks, but it also clarifies where leadership is needed most: here at home.

John Imes is co-founder and executive director of the Wisconsin Environmental Initiative and village president of Shorewood Hills.