

What the White House's Building Performance Standard Means and How to Do It Right

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Taking a cue from climate-ambitious U.S. cities, the federal government announced Monday it will leverage building performance standards—an emerging type of legislation that sets performance requirements for buildings—as a means of significantly lowering greenhouse gas emissions. Specifically, the White House [announced](#) that its Council on Environmental Quality is launching an interagency Federal sustainability effort with the Department of Energy, and Environmental Protection Agency, and General Services Administration to develop the first-ever building performance standard (BPS) for federal government buildings.

Why this matters

As a national leader in identifying levers for widespread action to decarbonize buildings and in developing building performance standards, IMT applauds this step as one of several that will lead to dramatic reductions in carbon, help stabilize our electric grid, and improve the health and well-being of those in the buildings.

Setting a Federal BPS is a concrete step toward achieving President Biden's pledge to cut U.S. greenhouse gas emissions 50%–52% by 2030. Energy use in buildings currently accounts for 74% of national electricity consumption and roughly 1/3 of U.S. annual greenhouse gas emissions. The Federal government owns and leases a substantial portion of U.S. real estate, so leadership in this portfolio will be key to hitting national targets. With such a strong market presence, the Federal government can also use its BPS-related actions to help build and grow a steady demand for energy services and products, thereby growing jobs, reducing costs, and making access to these technologies and services more widespread.

How can the Feds do this right?

IMT is assisting numerous local and state governments to develop, adopt, and implement BPS. Given this expertise, we recommend the following key next steps for the Federal government:

1. Set clear performance targets and metrics for each agency with accompanying deadlines. These targets should drive Federal buildings to remove fossil-burning combustion equipment and dramatically reduce energy use. We believe these targets should be more aggressive than any city policy and set a model for what is possible.
2. Use a trajectory approach to set interim and final standards, similar to that recommended in IMT's [model BPS ordinance](#). We need all buildings to improve performance and reduce emissions. However, no two buildings are exactly alike, and the landscape of existing structures is poorly served by a one-size fits all rule. A trajectory approach sets clear and measurable future performance standards with building-specific interim milestones, and allows flexibility in how buildings meet those milestones.
3. Commit to improvements beyond energy, such as indoor air quality, water reductions, and resilience. A Federal BPS creates an opportunity to improve building performance on many dimensions, and it is most cost-effective to do so as part of a comprehensive plan.
 - **Indoor air quality:** With the current pandemic easing slowly and the need to guard against new pandemics, the government should move quickly to ensure Federal buildings support increased air flow and improved air quality.

Meet the Authors

Cliff Majersik

Senior Advisor, Policy and Programs

cliff@imt.org

Ryan Freed

Director, Public Sector

ryan.freed@imt.org

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improved air quality.

- **Water:** Set short- and long-term savings targets with a focus on drought-prone areas.
 - **Resilience:** Evaluate building vulnerability to risks including flooding, wildfires, and other hazards aggravated by climate change, and ensure systems can withstand power outages and heat or cold emergencies.
 - **Grid:** Modernize buildings so they can rapidly respond to the electric grid, sharing or storing excess power so as to enhance power reliability and accelerate grid decarbonization.
4. Use this BPS as an opportunity to create jobs and improve equity. Partner with unions, landlords, and contractors to disseminate best practices in building operations and maintenance and raise awareness of job opportunities. Streamline Federal procurement processes to eliminate barriers to minority- and women-owned businesses.
 5. Publish all performance targets and annual progress against them. Transparency enables accountability and competition, which will promote a culture of innovation and help scale and sustain best practices.

These actions by the Federal government represent a great step forward in combatting climate change and improving the economy. Done well, this new BPS could be a launching point for cities and companies across the country to further similar policies and rapidly decarbonize the country's existing and new building stock in a way that also makes communities economically stronger and more resilient to change. IMT looks forward to helping governments and communities at all levels rise to the challenges of this moment and create buildings that better serve us all.

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