

White House puts 'super pollutant' HFCs in crosshairs with new initiative

Measures announced on Thursday aim to avoid up to 1bn tonnes of carbon pollution globally by 2025 ahead of December's climate change summit in Paris



Air conditioners are among the biggest emitters of hydrofluorocarbons. Photograph: Vivek Prakash/Reuters
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Barack Obama used his executive authority to fight climate change once again on Thursday, targeting the powerful "super pollutants" used in air conditioners and refrigerators that account for a rising share of carbon pollution.

The suite of measures rolled out on Thursday would avoid up to 1bn tonnes of carbon pollution globally by 2025 – and help set the stage for a strong deal to fight climate change in Paris in December, White House officials said.

Hydrofluorocarbons, or HFCs, which are used in air conditioners, refrigerators and fire extinguishing foams, are one of the most dangerous greenhouse gases in terms of climate change – because they are up to 10,000 times more warming than carbon dioxide.

And their use is rising rapidly. In the US alone, HFC emissions are expected to triple by 2030, the White House said, and their use is expanding in developing countries like India and China as well. Left unchecked, HFCs will account for 20% of global warming by mid-century.

Ernie Moniz, the energy secretary, said the initiatives would be critical to global efforts to hold warming to 2C (3.6F) in order to avoid catastrophic climate change. Rising HFC use alone accounts for a significant share of warming, he said.

"If we traject the continued used of HFC for cooling etcetera around the world ... we are talking about the equivalent of half a degree centigrade global warming rise," he said. "Let's face it. We have got a tough road ahead to get down to 2 degrees. This is a half degree, so that is a big deal."

Gina McCarthy, who heads the Environmental Protection Agency, said it was important to eliminate the more polluting HFCs now – because they were deployed in the emerging economies of the developing world. "With the use of HFCs, if we do nothing it is going to escalate tremendously," she said. "But if we act, that curve will essentially go away."

Campaigners said the initiatives would help cement Obama's climate change legacy. They praised the president for using his executive authority and leveraging commitments from the business world to fight climate change despite opposition from Republican-controlled Congress.

"The White House made it very clear they are going to pull out all the stops to eliminate one of the top six greenhouse gases from the universe," said Durwood Zaelke, president of the Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development. "It is encouraging to see what the administration is capable of doing when it marshals all of its resources."

Thursday's measures follow on Obama's earlier efforts to phase out the super pollutants, through a [deal with China](#) and in international negotiations.

Under the latest initiative, Obama will resort once more to the Environmental Protection Agency – the agency responsible for his single biggest climate measure, the clean power plant rules – to tackle HFC emissions.

In the run-up to the Paris climate conference, the White House has overseen dozens of new announcements and initiatives intended to spur momentum towards a deal.

The White House said in a fact sheet that the initiatives would highlight US leadership on phasing out HFCs, through joint deals with China, India and Brazil, and international negotiations.

Obama's use of his executive authority has infuriated Republicans. The leading Republican presidential contenders, as well as a majority in Congress, deny climate change is a threat or caused by human activity, and oppose Obama's efforts to fight it.

Under the measures announced on Thursday, the EPA proposed new rules to plug leaks of HFCs from existing air conditioners and fridges. The agency early next year will impose new deadlines for phasing out HFCs in uses where there are safer chemicals available, the White House said in a fact sheet.

The new measures will step up the pace of phase-out, coming on the heels of a first stage announced in July.

The Pentagon said it would stall new cooling systems on navy destroyers and transport ships, and work with Nato countries to phase out HFCs on explosion protection.

Meanwhile, the Department of Energy moved to convert developing countries such as Saudi Arabia and India to lower-polluting forms of coolants by releasing new research that showed they functioned just as well in the extreme heat of Death Valley as traditional, super-pollutant HFCs.