

Biden to halt fossil fuel leasing on federal land

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The Biden administration has drafted an order imposing a moratorium on oil and gas auctions on federal land and water, according to reports

President Joe Biden will announce new bans on drilling on federal lands, as well as a US-hosted climate summit in April, as part of a raft of

actions that take aim at rising global temperatures.

The federal government will pause new oil and natural gas leases on public lands or offshore waters "to the extent possible," and review existing leases, according to a statement.

The issue was politically explosive during the election campaign, especially in the battleground state of Pennsylvania where fracking led to a natural gas boom.

The US would also pledge to conserve 30 percent of all federal land and water by 2030, part of an international push to stem biodiversity loss and confront climate change.

Other actions include establishing climate considerations as an essential element of US foreign policy and national security, resurrecting a presidential council of science advisors, directing agencies to invest in areas with deep economic ties to fossil fuels, and assisting communities disproportionately impacted by environmental harm.

A presidential memorandum on scientific integrity will direct agencies to make decisions guided by the best available evidence.

The US will further announce a US-hosted Climate Leaders' Summit on April 22—Earth Day and also the fifth anniversary of the signing ceremony of the Paris Agreement.

Almost a quarter of American carbon dioxide emissions come from energy produced on public lands, according to a government report from 2018.

The drilling generated \$11.7 billion in revenue in 2019, according to official data.



Environmental activist Leann Leiter uses an infrared camera to look for invisible emissions from the Mad Dog 2020 fracking site in Pennsylvania

The measures are therefore significant steps towards Biden's campaign pledges to transition away from fossil fuels on the way to net zero emissions in the power sector by 2035 and the economy as a whole by 2050.

Taken together, the actions are "consistent with President Biden and Vice President Harris raising global climate ambition starting here at home," Sherri Goodman, deputy undersecretary of defense for environmental security under former president Barack Obama, told AFP.

Industry backlash

Nonprofit Oceana has called on Biden to go further and turn the moratorium into a ban.

It released an analysis that found making offshore drilling protections permanent for unleased federal waters could prevent over 19 billion tons of greenhouse gas emissions and more than \$720 billion in damages.

"By permanently protecting our coasts from dirty offshore drilling and advancing clean energy sources like offshore wind, we can simultaneously combat climate change and safeguard our clean coast economy," said Oceana campaign director Diane Hoskins.

But the proposals have triggered a backlash from the fossil fuel industry.

"Restricting development on federal lands and waters is nothing more than an 'import more oil' policy," said American Petroleum Institute President and CEO Mike Sommers.

"Energy demand will continue to rise—especially as the economy recovers—and we can choose to produce that energy here in the United States or rely on foreign countries hostile to American interests."



Wind turbines are viewed at a wind farm in Colorado City, Texas

International summit

David Waskow, of the World Resources Institute, said the proposed summit on April 22 is a chance for a new multilateral climate push after four years under Donald Trump.

"This will be an opportunity for the US to come to the table with others to press forward the agenda and sort of add to the drumbeat on the way to COP26," the UN climate meeting that will be hosted in Glasgow later this year, he told AFP.

The US would also be expected to raise its Paris accord ambitions at the summit, and potentially target as much as a 50-percent reduction in total greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 2005 levels.

Biden, who will seek a green infrastructure package from Congress next month that could run up to \$2 trillion or more, will face political challenges from Republicans.

But Goodman, now a senior fellow at the Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Program, said she saw opportunities for bipartisanship.

"Remember that states like Texas and Wyoming also have huge wind potential," she said, adding that there was increased recognition of the realities of climate change.

"More rapid polar ice melt, sea ice retreat, collapsing permafrost and higher temperatures all underscore the importance of recognizing climate as an essential element of our foreign policy and national security planning."

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