

Oil drilling proposal for Everglades may face tougher time with Biden administration

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A Texas company's plans to drill for oil in the Everglades may have a tougher time winning approval, now that an administration that's skeptical of fossil fuels has taken over in Washington.

Burnett Oil Co. has proposed drilling at two sites in Big Cypress National Preserve, important Florida panther habitat that sprawls across

both sides of Alligator Alley. Although [oil drilling](#) has taken place there on a modest scale since the 1970s, the potential expansion has generated intense opposition from environmentalists.

They hope to find an ally in President Joe Biden, who has taken steps to reduce the use of fossil fuels and has attempted to impose a moratorium on new oil and gas leases on federal land.

"If the Biden administration permits this project to proceed, this would be the first and only new industrial oil development allowed to be built inside a national park unit anywhere in the country since he took office," said Melissa Abdo, regional director of the National Parks Conservation Association.

"It would run completely counter to the administration's climate goals. We have every hope and expectation that Interior Secretary [Deb] Haaland will listen to the many voices, including indigenous ones, speaking up in opposition to this alarming proposal."

Drivers experience Big Cypress as a 30-mile blur of trees along both sides of Alligator Alley. But behind the fences that keep wildlife off the interstate stands important habitat for the Florida panther, red-cockaded woodpecker, black bear, alligator and many other species. The preserve is a popular destination for hunting, fishing, hiking and bird watching.

Burnett Oil, which did not respond to requests for comment, did exploratory seismic work during the Trump administration, using sound waves to look for oil. The work had been approved during the Obama administration.

Since these initial operations, a new administration has taken over and begun to implement policies less friendly to the oil industry. Biden announced a moratorium on new oil and gas leases on federal land and

began to implement tougher policies to fight climate change, which is largely driven by [fossil fuels](#).

The lease moratorium was rescinded this summer pending a court challenge, and the oil drilling proposal for Big Cypress would not have been affected anyway, since the mineral rights are in private hands. But environmentalists say they hope an administration concerned about climate change will take a critical look at the idea of extracting more oil from the Everglades.

"You have Biden's executive orders that place emphasis on addressing the climate crisis and environmental justice issues," said Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director of the Center for Biological Diversity. "And one would think that in Big Cypress you would want to not engage in further oil extraction activities, particularly in light of the potential contribution to the climate crisis."

Environmental groups opposed to the work set up a web site this week at www.savebigcypress.org.

The oil drilling plan also needs state approval, including permits from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Gov. Ron DeSantis last year blocked a proposal to drill for oil in the Everglades of western Broward County, arranging a buyout to protect the land. But that proposal would have affected state land, and the Big Cypress proposal is on federal land. And the governor's influence on a particular permit application is limited by the legal requirements on how an agency makes permitting decisions.

Jared Williams, a spokesman for DeSantis, referred questions to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

The company has applied for state permits to build two drilling pads, with further permits required before drilling could start. DEP said the application process is in its early stages, with the agency seeking more information from the company about its plans. In addition, DEP will be receiving comments from other agencies, such as those dealing with wildlife protection, and opening the process up for public comment before issuing a decision.

"It is still very early in the department's review of the applications," the agency said in a statement. "The department has sent a second request for additional information from the applicant."

The National Park Service said the company's application is still under review.

Oil drilling has taken place in southwest Florida since the 1940s, although the region never developed into the major source of production envisioned by its pioneers.

Two small wellfields are active today at Big Cypress, where the mineral rights have remained in the hands of the Collier family, descendants of southwest Florida pioneer Barron Collier. The oil goes by truck to Port Everglades for shipment to refineries on the Gulf of Mexico.

The new drilling would take place at two spots. One drilling pad would be north of Tamiami Trail near the Miccosukee reservation, and the other would be south of Alligator Alley within five miles of the Seminole reservation.

"The Seminole Tribe has significant interest in these applications and the areas that will be negatively impacted as a result of the proposed activities," the Tribe wrote in a letter to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Big Cypress "holds great significance to the Seminole Tribe as part of the Tribe's historic and cultural home," the tribe wrote. "As a result, there are sites that hold historic and cultural significance to the Seminole Tribe located throughout BCNP and BCNP's ecological mosaic provides habitat for numerous animal and plant species that also hold cultural significance to the Tribe."

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