

Biden aims for most ambitious US effort on climate change

27 January 2021, by Matthew Daly and Ellen Knickmeyer



In this April 9, 2014, file photo, oil rigs stand in the Loco Hills field on U.S. Highway 82 in Eddy County near Artesia, N.M., one of the most active regions of the Permian Basin. President Joe Biden is set to announce a wide-ranging moratorium on new oil and gas leasing on U.S. lands, as his administration moves quickly to reverse Trump administration policies on energy and the environment and address climate change. (AP Photo/Jeri Clausing, File)

President Joe Biden on Wednesday was undertaking the most ambitious effort ever to cut America's oil, gas and coal emissions and stave off the worst effects of climate change. New executive orders target federal subsidies for those industries and halt new oil and gas leases on federal lands and waters.

The orders awaiting his signature aim to conserve 30 percent of the country's lands and ocean waters in the next 10 years, move to an all-electric federal vehicle fleet and elevate [climate change](#) to a national security priority. The conservation plan would set aside millions of acres for recreation, wildlife and climate efforts by 2030 as part of Biden's campaign pledge for a \$2 trillion program to slow global warming.

The president is directing agencies to focus help and investment on the low-income and minority

communities that live closest to polluting refineries and other installations, and the oil- and coal-patch towns that face job losses as the nation moves to wind, solar and other cleaner energy.

Biden's actions make clear that "both significant short-term global emission reductions and net zero global emissions by mid-century – or before – are required to avoid setting the world on a dangerous, potentially catastrophic, climate trajectory," the White House said in a statement before the orders were signed.

They are his latest moves to turn away from President Donald Trump's policies. Trump, who ridiculed the science of climate change, withdrew the U.S. from the Paris global climate accord, opened more public lands to coal, gas and oil production and weakened regulation on fossil fuel emissions. Experts say these emissions are heating the Earth's climate dangerously and worsening floods, droughts and other natural disasters.

Biden and his supporters say the investment in cleaner energy national will net millions of jobs. But that probably will take years to happen, and the orders will face intense opposition from oil and gas and power plant industries, as well as from many Republican—and Democratic—lawmakers.

Kathleen Sgamma, president of the Western Energy Alliance, which represents oil and gas drillers in Western states, said an expected order is intended to delay drilling on federal lands to the point where it is no longer viable. Her group pledged a legal challenge.

"The environmental left is leading the agenda at the White House when it comes to energy and environment issues," she said. She noted that the freeze would be felt most acutely in states such as Utah, Wyoming and North Dakota—all won by Trump.

A 60-day suspension of new drilling permits for U.S. lands and waters was announced last week.

The order directs the interior secretary to pause on entering into new oil and natural [gas leases](#) on public lands or offshore waters "to the extent possible" and undertake a rigorous review of all leasing and permitting of oil, gas and coal on federal land. It also aims to double energy production from offshore wind. The Trump administration slowed permit review of some giant offshore wind turbine projects.



President Joe Biden answers questions from reporters in the South Court Auditorium on the White House complex, Monday, Jan. 25, 2021, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Significantly, the order directs agencies to eliminate spending that acts as subsidies for fossil fuel industries. It orders agencies to look instead for ways to spur research and development in cleaner-energy technology.

"The fossil fuel industry has inflicted tremendous damage on the planet. The administration's review, if done correctly, will show that filthy fracking and drilling must end for good, everywhere," said Kierán Suckling, executive director at the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group that has pushed for the drilling pause.

Oil industry groups slammed the move, saying

Biden had already eliminated thousands of oil and gas jobs by killing the Keystone XL oil pipeline on his first day in office.

"This is just the start. It will get worse," said Brook Simmons, president of the Petroleum Alliance of Oklahoma. "Meanwhile, the laws of physics, chemistry and supply and demand remain in effect. Oil and natural gas prices are going up, and so will home heating bills, consumer prices and fuel costs."

A 60-day suspension order at the Interior Department did not limit existing oil and gas operations under valid leases, meaning activity would not come to a sudden halt on the millions of acres of lands in the West and offshore in the Gulf of Mexico where much drilling is concentrated. The freeze also is unlikely to affect existing leases. Its effect could be further blunted by companies that stockpiled enough drilling permits in Trump's final months to allow them to keep pumping oil and gas for years.

The pause in onshore drilling is limited to federal lands and does not affect drilling on private lands, which is largely regulated by states.

Oil and gas extracted from [public lands](#) and waters account for about a quarter of annual U.S. production. Extracting and burning those fuels generates the equivalent of almost 550 million tons (500 million metric tons) of greenhouse gases annually, the U.S. Geological Survey said in a 2018 study.

Under Trump, officials approved almost 1,400 permits on federal lands, primarily in Wyoming and New Mexico, over a three-month period that included the election, according to an Associated Press analysis of government data. Those permits, which remain valid, will allow companies to continue drilling for years, potentially undercutting Biden's climate agenda.

Biden will direct all U.S. agencies to use science and evidence-based decision-making in federal rule-making and announce a U.S.-hosted climate leaders summit on Earth Day, April 22.

He also is expected to establish a White House office on environmental justice to serve low-income and minority communities that suffer disproportionately from air and water pollution and industrial waste and are often located near hazardous sites such as power plants, landfills and incinerators.

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