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By Taylor McKinnon, opinion contributor — 06/13/19 04:30 PM EDT 193

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# Congress should make Interior's Bernhardt 'manage the land to stop climate change'

Interior Secretary David Bernhardt's war on climate has taken a dangerous new turn in recent weeks as he's moved to reopen U.S. public lands to new coal leasing.

Last month a federal court found unlawful the Interior Department's 2017 decision to lift a federal coal leasing moratorium without undertaking any environmental review.

Bernhardt's new analysis would restart the coal leasing program. It presumes no significant environmental and "negligible" climate impacts.

Given the federal coal program's enormous threat to our climate, tens of thousands of Americans and dozens of groups this week responded to his plan by calling for an end to new leasing.

The Interior Department's own data, published last year, show that federal coal production caused approximately 13 percent of all U.S. carbon dioxide pollution in 2014.

Bernhardt's latest move reflects the cynicism he demonstrated last month when he blamed Congress for the climate disaster he's inflicting on U.S. public lands.

"You know what there's not a shall for 'I shall manage the land to stop climate change,' or something similar to that," he told a House subcommittee hearing.

"You guys come up with the shalls."

He's wrong, of course. Federal laws direct Bernhardt to "take any action necessary to prevent unnecessary... degradation" of public lands," to "protect the quality of... air and atmospheric... values" and to manage public land to "best meet the present and future needs of the American people."

To no one's surprise, Bernhardt has been clear that he'll continue to flout those obligations to benefit his former lobbying clients in the fossil-fuel industry. He's even said, "I haven't lost any sleep" over news of atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations surging to 415 parts per million, the highest in human history.

As Bernhardt has slumbered, climate chaos has contributed to thousands of American lives lost in Puerto Rico, massive coral bleaching in Australia, floods in the Midwest, fires in California and a frightening acceleration of species extinctions.

Unless urgent action is taken, we can expect worse in decades to come. But acting to curb climate change is one thing we can count on Bernhardt not to do.

Instead, he's orchestrating a massive new commitment of climate pollution from public lands. In addition to restarting the coal leasing program, onshore oil and gas leases sold in the lower 48 states alone since 2017 span 3 million acres, containing almost 900 million tons of potential climate pollution.

That massive new carbon lock-in reverses a decade-long decline of new oil and gas leases on public lands. It defies urgent calls from top climate scientists with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for unprecedented action in the coming decade to avoid climate disaster.

Each new federal lease guarantees future pollution that our climate can't afford. Once they start producing oil or gas, leases can last decades. Unleased federal fossil fuels on public lands and oceans contain up to 450 billion tons of potential greenhouse gas pollution.

If fully developed, the 43 billion tons of potential pollution and 67 million acres of federal oil, gas and coal already under lease (as of 2015) would last long past when we'd need to move beyond those fossil fuels. It would essentially exhaust the U.S. carbon budget scientists say is necessary to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius.

As it is, pollution from the world's currently producing oil and gas reserves, if fully developed — and even without counting coal — would take us beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming, the limit for avoiding the most severe consequences. New oil, gas and coal leases on public lands worsen that problem.

Responding to Bernhardt, Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-Maine) hit the nail on the head. "If there's something legally stopping you [from acting on climate], we're Congress," she said. "We make the laws. Let us know. We'll work on that for you."

No, there's nothing stopping him. Interior secretaries have clear legal authority to end new federal leasing and manage the decline of production on existing leases. And if they shirk their duties, the Constitution gives Congress authority to direct the secretary to act.

So, lawmakers should heed Bernhardt's cynical suggestion and introduce legislation banning new federal fossil fuel leases and creating a managed decline for producing leases.

That legislation, if it doesn't pass, can at least guide executive action for a future president.

One way or another, preserving a survivable climate future will require ending the extraction of coal, oil and gas on our public lands. Congress should lead now by forcing Bernhardt to do his job and protect the planet