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# Biden to order sweeping actions to pause drilling and fight climate change

(Associated Press)

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WASHINGTON — The Biden administration plans to announce Wednesday a moratorium on new oil and gas leasing on public lands, one of a series of executive actions the president is taking to demonstrate his commitment to fighting climate change, despite major opposition from the fossil fuel industry. The move will effectively hit pause on the federal government's leasing program while the administration considers an overhaul, weighing the climate and public health risks of continued oil and gas development against the government's legal obligations to energy companies. This review is the first step toward an outright ban on new drilling, one of Biden's campaign promises.

The order on drilling is one of a slate of executive actions on climate policy the president will sign Wednesday that are likely to reignite debate over the federal government's control of public land. The president will also direct his administration to protect 30% of the nation's federal land and coastal waters by 2030, a proposal that climate scientists and environmentalists have advocated for internationally as a way to curb global warming and protect endangered species.

According to the United States Geological Survey, the extraction and consumption of oil, gas and coal from federal lands and waters accounts for nearly a quarter of the nation's total carbon dioxide emissions.

The order also calls for the creation of a Civilian Climate Corps that will put Americans to work restoring forests, improving recreation on public lands and addressing the effects climate change.

Biden will also sign an executive order to create a task force to devise a plan for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and another directive making climate change a national security priority.

Other orders will give priority to the needs of people living in communities burdened by industrial pollution, elevating the issue of environmental justice that was important to many of the young and minority voters that supported Biden's candidacy. He will issue an order creating a White House

interagency council on environmental justice, as well as new offices within the departments of Justice and of Health and Human Services to deal with the subject.

The president also plans to sign a memorandum on scientific integrity directing agencies to make decisions based on scientific evidence and data — a statement intended, in effect, to distinguish Biden's administration from President Trump's, which was widely condemned for ignoring or contradicting science in policymaking.

"This is the most ambitious climate platform put forward by an American president," said Sam Ricketts, the climate advisor on Washington Gov. Jay Inslee's presidential campaign and the co-founder of Evergreen Action, a group pushing for federal climate action. "It is mobilizing the entirety of federal government in an unprecedented way. Every agency is now a climate agency."

Collectively, the moves are designed to signal to the president's supporters and the fossil fuel industry that he intends to make curbing climate change a priority, even if Congress doesn't.

With a slim one-vote majority of Democrats controlling the Senate, the administration's hopes of passing major climate legislation or energy sector regulation rest with a few moderates who have long-standing political and financial ties to oil, gas and coal companies.

But the Interior Department has considerable authority over federal lands, which the administration can use to put pressure on fossil fuel companies and their investors, and encourage the development of renewable energy. Biden's executive order on leasing will direct the department to create a plan to double energy production from offshore wind by 2030.

The actions Biden takes on Wednesday and those that follow will test the limits of his authority to unilaterally confront climate change. The plans the administration has drafted follow up on the ambitious Clean Power Plan advanced during the Obama era in an effort to curb electricity sector emissions. That earlier effort ran into legal issues, with the Supreme Court ultimately blocking its enactment. Some of this week's actions are certain to be challenged in court as well.

Heather Zichal, who served as deputy assistant for energy and climate change under President Obama, said that, in recent years, environmental regulators and policy advisors have become more savvy about crafting executive orders that will withstand legal challenge. It wasn't a focus early in the Obama era, Zichal said, when the emphasis was mostly on the unsuccessful effort to persuade a Democratic-controlled Congress to pass major climate legislation.

Over the past four years, however, as President Trump relentlessly rolled back federal environmental rules, activists studied how a Democrat in the White House would be able to most effectively — and durably — use the executive branch's powers to steer the government back toward aggressively pursuing greenhouse gas reductions.

"This is absolutely an unprecedented commitment to climate policy," Zichal said of Biden's plans. "They are not wasting any time."

Environmental advocates are thrilled, seeing the emerging actions as a corrective to the Trump administration's campaign to auction off as much public land as possible, including a last-minute rush to allow drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge before Trump left office this month.

“This is an opportunity for the Biden administration to think about what an orderly and equitable transition away from fossil fuels on our lands and oceans will look like,” said Taylor McKinnon, senior public lands campaigner for the Center for Biological Diversity. “A rigorous climate review will show there’s simply no more room for new federal fossil leasing.”

Oil companies’ largest trade group, the American Petroleum Institute, criticized the move, saying it would lead to higher energy costs and a greater reliance on foreign oil imports. But some energy companies, hammered by low oil and gas prices and under increasing pressure from investors, are already moving away from fossil fuels and investing in renewable energy.

Many others are still sitting on leases they stockpiled during the Trump administration but haven’t used.

These companies may ultimately blunt the effect of the pause on leasing by continuing to extract oil and gas from existing leases for years. And because most of the tax revenue from fossil fuel development comes not from leasing, but from royalties on oil produced, it’s possible the moratorium’s effect on states like New Mexico and Wyoming won’t be as dire as some have predicted.

“If what this pause does is say to the oil companies, ‘OK, you have thousands of permits you’re not using, let’s work on those,’ that’s still a lot,” said Nada Culver, vice president of public lands for the National Audubon Society. “The industry is not acknowledging what they already have out there.”

It’s not clear how the moratorium will affect leases sold in the final weeks of the Trump administration. In California, oil companies bought rights to drill on federal land in Kern County at an auction in December. But some of those leases haven’t been finalized, raising questions about whether the companies will be able to act on them.

The push to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and conserve millions of acres of federal land comes as climate change and its effects are accelerating. Sea ice is quickly melting worldwide and sea levels are rising. In the U.S., record-breaking wildfires in the West and flooding in the Midwest are forcing people from their homes and communities. Last year effectively tied 2016 as the hottest year on record.

During an appearance on MSNBC’s “The Rachel Maddow Show” earlier this week, Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer of New York said that Biden should consider declaring a national emergency on climate, to take action without Congress’ approval. Biden has so far resisted the idea, preferring to see if Republicans are willing to work on bipartisan legislation.

Evan Halper writes about a broad range of policy issues out of Washington D.C., with particular emphasis on how Washington regulates, agitates and very often miscalculates in its dealings with California. Before heading east, he was the Los Angeles Times bureau chief in Sacramento, where he spent a decade untangling California’s epic budget mess and political dysfunction.