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Biden to halt new oil drilling on federal lands, coastal waters in major climate move for U.S., California

[Kurtis Alexander](#) Jan. 27, 2021 Updated: Jan. 27, 2021 11:13 a.m.



2of2An offshore oil platform off the coast of Ventura, California at sunset with the Sierra Madre Mountains in the background. Photo: Gary Kavanagh / Getty Images/iStockphoto

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President Biden, acting quickly to differentiate his climate agenda from his predecessor's, rolled out a slate of environmental directives Wednesday, including an indefinite suspension of new oil and gas development on federal land and waters.

The far-reaching moratorium is widely viewed as first step to halting the granting of federal drilling leases permanently, and it marks a milestone in California's half-century fight to keep the federal government from expanding fossil fuel extraction across the state.

Oil and gas companies, which operate off the Southern California coast and in the flatlands of Kern and Monterey counties, are already vowing to fight the move while the environmental community stands firmly behind it.

The moratorium, which the White House says the president will officially issue Wednesday, is designed to yield a significant drop in the fossil fuel pollution that's warming the planet. Oil and gas extraction on federal lands is responsible for nearly a quarter of the nation's emissions of carbon dioxide, the dominant planet-warming gas, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

"Yes, we're excited about it. Yes, we're relieved," said Mary Creasman, CEO of the California League of Conservation Voters. "The Trump administration was looking to expand oil and gas drilling, especially in inland California. This isn't just a reversal of that, this is going an extra step to stop (new) drilling."

Among the other actions in the president's pending executive order, according to the White House, is a call to conserve 30% of all the nation's lands and ocean by 2030. The "30x30" vision is likely to translate into money and support for conserving areas at risk of fossil fuel extraction or other development. This includes possible swaths of Northern California and the Los Padres National Forest on the Central Coast.

Also in the order is a call for more greenhouse gas regulation and establishing climate change as a consideration when making national security decisions.

The directives follow a handful of climate-oriented actions taken by the president last week, which include recommitting the United States to the Paris climate accord. The administration also announced a 60-day pause on federal oil and gas leasing last week, but this week's indefinite moratorium takes it up a notch — or several.

Under the order, fossil fuel companies on federal lands or water can continue operating under the terms of their leases, but no new leases will be auctioned off by the federal government.

The oil and gas industry criticized the move as bad for the economy, estimating that nearly 1 million jobs and \$9 billion in tax revenue would be lost nationwide by 2022.

Industry officials also said the moratorium would result in a greater reliance on foreign energy.

“We share President Biden’s goal for addressing climate change, marked by U.S. innovation and powered by American energy and skilled union workers,” said Mike Sommers, president and CEO of the American Petroleum Institute in a statement Wednesday. “Unfortunately, today’s executive action to halt leasing is a step backwards both for our nation’s economic recovery and environmental progress.”

In California, drilling on federal lands and waters has long been a prickly issue, with different approaches taken by different presidential administrations.

Three years ago, former President Trump introduced an offshore drilling plan that called for an unprecedented boost in fossil fuel development at sea, including six new drilling leases off the California coast. Meanwhile, his administration opened up nearly 2 million acres of state lands to potential oil and gas leasing.

Trump’s offshore plan was held up in court, which maintained California’s streak of having no new ocean drilling since 1984.

“The California coast has really been hanging by a thread for a long time,” said Richard Charter, senior fellow at the Ocean Foundation and a Bodega Bay resident who has spent decades fighting fossil fuel development. “What a difference a new administration means for the California coast.”

Onshore, the Trump administration sold its first leases for new oil and gas development in California under Trump’s plan last month, all in the Bakersfield area.

“The pause in leasing is a historical moment,” said Clare Lakewood, a senior attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, whose organization has sued over federal plans to expand leasing in the San Joaquin Valley. “We should reflect on the fact that we have a president in the White House who is taking a step to protecting us from the climate crisis.”

While California won’t see new fossil fuel extraction on federal lands and waters, the state still permits new drilling on private lands, where the majority of the state’s oil and gas development takes place. Environmental groups and climate activists have been calling for Gov. Gavin Newsom to halt the practice.

“I think he needs to take a good hard look at what President Biden has done and ask why California is lagging,” Lakewood said.

A United Nations-sponsored report has estimated that fossil fuel development worldwide needs to drop 6% annually through 2030 for the goals of the Paris accord to be met and catastrophic warming to be avoided.

Kurtis Alexander is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer.

Email: kalexander@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@kurtisalexander](https://twitter.com/kurtisalexander)