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Biden plans surge of climate policies, including drilling pause

- Benjamin J. Hulac and Joseph Morton CQ-Roll Call (TNS)

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President Joe Biden is expected to unveil a raft of climate, environment and public lands moves on Wednesday, including leasing moratoriums for coal, oil and natural gas on federal land and in federal water, according to multiple congressional, industry and environmental sources.

The White House will announce the creation of a national climate task force to span the executive branch, the formation of environmental justice roles across government and the unveiling of a presidential memorandum on “scientific integrity,” according to people familiar with the plans.

Biden will also set a national goal to permanently protect 30 percent of the country’s federal lands and waters from development by 2030, and the administration is also expected to pause new oil and gas leases on federal land and in federal waters through a one-year moratorium, as well as issue a three-year moratorium on coal leasing on federal territory, according to an industry source.

In a callback to Depression-era public works programs, Biden is also expected to sign an executive order establishing a Civilian Conservation Corps to employ unemployed or

underemployed citizens in work on federal projects like flood resilience, infrastructure and forestry issues.

The moves follow a flurry of climate policy announcements Biden made his first day in office, when he rescinded a permit for the Keystone XL pipeline, set the U.S. back on track to rejoin the Paris climate agreement of 2015 and directed a review across federal agencies of more than 100 environmental and energy actions by the Trump administration.

In its first week, the Biden administration made climate change a focus. Federal agencies have created new environmental justice positions, Cabinet nominees have spoken about the warming world during their confirmation hearings and the president dedicated a section of his inaugural address to the planetary crisis.

On Jan. 20, Scott de la Vega, the acting Department of the Interior secretary, issued a 60-day freeze on certain DOI activities, including pausing onshore and offshore leasing and permitting.

The administration will also announce on Wednesday a global climate summit on Earth Day, April 22, of international officials.

Speaking last week to business leaders in Italy, John Kerry, the White House international climate envoy, lambasted the “wasted” four years of the previous administration. “We really don’t have a minute to waste,” he said.

U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said during an interview on “The Rachel Maddow Show” Monday night that Biden should consider declaring a national emergency on climate because that would allow him to take many bold actions without having to first ask permission from Congress.

“I would suggest that they explore looking at climate as an emergency, which would give them more flexibility,” Schumer said. “After all, it’s a crisis.”

Brett Hartl, government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity, welcomed Schumer's comments and said his group would be thrilled with such a declaration.

There are significant differences between using the preamble of an executive order to state that climate change is an existential threat and officially declaring it to be an emergency under the National Emergencies Act. The latter unlocks powers embedded in many existing statutes, granting additional authorities to agencies across the board, he said.

Biden has talked about using a whole-of-government approach to tackle climate change, after all.

"Give Gina McCarthy as much power as possible to make that happen," Hartl said, referring to Biden's White House national climate adviser.

Declaring climate a national emergency would allow Biden to take specific actions such as restricting U.S. crude oil exports. A previous moratorium on those exports ended during the Obama administration.

"The only way that the moratorium comes back is if there's a national emergency," Hartl said.

Broadly, each agency would have more flexibility to aggressively direct funding toward accomplishing the goals set out in Biden's climate-related executive orders.

"For the defense department, for example, they could tap into their gigantic budget more to deploy more renewable energy," Hartl said. "If you have a national emergency declared, you can get a lot more creative with how you use your funding."

The move also would give Biden more tools on the trade front, he said, by levying sanctions or blocking imported and exported products. The president could use that authority for leverage with Brazil over its handling of the Amazon, for example.

Biden appears likely to wait on an emergency declaration to see if Republicans show interest in a bipartisan climate measure. Hartl said it would take time, however, for agencies to make the new emergency authorities part of their regular operations.

Senate Democrats seem to be signaling to Biden that waiting on Republicans, who have sharply criticized the president for his environmental maneuvers, could be fruitless.