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Biden Urged To Halt New Offshore Oil Leases For Near Future

By [Morgan Conley](#)

Law360 (March 16, 2021, 5:32 PM EDT) -- Environmental advocates lodged a petition with the [U.S. Department of the Interior](#) on Tuesday asking the agency to ban new federal leases for offshore oil and gas development for a five-year period, arguing the moratorium is needed to make good on President Joe Biden's promise to combat climate change.

In a 43-page petition, [Center for Biological Diversity](#), Cook Inletkeeper, Healthy Gulf and Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation asked [freshly confirmed](#) Interior Secretary Deb Haaland to seize an upcoming opportunity to put in place a new five-year Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program that doesn't open up any new leases for offshore drilling in federal waters. The groups told the agency the moratorium is the logical next step once it wraps up the review of the federal leasing program, as directed [through an executive order](#) handed down during Biden's first week in office.

"The Biden administration is rightly concerned about offshore drilling's threats, and a five-year halt would be a strong next step," Kristen Monsell, oceans legal director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement Tuesday. "The time has come to boldly address the climate crisis and protect coastal communities and wildlife. We simply can't keep issuing long-term leases to plunder our oceans. Dirty and dangerous offshore drilling needs to be phased out, starting now."

The petition comes the day after the [U.S. Senate](#) voted to confirm Rep. Haaland as DOI secretary. Haaland is a member of the [Pueblo of Laguna](#) and is the first Native American to hold a Cabinet post.

Haaland has spoken publicly about her climate change views and opposition to energy projects, including her participation in protests against the Dakota Access pipeline in North Dakota before she was elected to Congress. Haaland told the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources during [hearings on her nomination](#) that she would follow President Biden's lead on policy and would be "guided by science" in decisions she'd face as DOI secretary.

The DOI declined to comment on the petition Tuesday.

Over 12 million acres of federal waters currently house active oil and gas leases, according to the group's petition. Since taking office, Biden has temporarily halted any new leases being opened up pending his administration's review of the leasing program. Multiple previously scheduled

lease sales have been canceled in the interim.

During his final months in office, former President Donald Trump [signed a memorandum](#) prohibiting offshore drilling for oil and natural gas off the coasts of Florida, Georgia and South Carolina for 10 years. The decision was seen as a change of pace from [a five-year offshore leasing plan](#) proposed by the DOI that would have opened up nearly all federal waters to potential drilling, including waters in the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans.

The Trump administration's plan was not finalized, in large part because [an Alaska federal judge invalidated](#) the portion of Trump's 2017 executive order directing restrictions on drilling in those oceans to be reviewed and potentially open them up for leases for fossil fuel exploration.

A moratorium on exploration and production on the Gulf of Mexico side of Florida is already in place and expires in 2022 due to the Obama administration's five-year offshore drilling plan finalized in November 2016. That 2017-2022 leasing program is also what put the Atlantic and Pacific oceans off-limits and shut off drilling in new regions of the Arctic Ocean.

The DOI is holding a virtual forum on March 25 to discuss the federal oil and gas program and gather information for an interim report that DOI expects to publish in early summer that will go over the federal government's energy programs and advise other agencies on how they should be handling environmental considerations, according to the agency's website.

--Editing by Emily Kokoll.