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Interior Department announces virtual forum to review oil and gas lease moratorium

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The Interior Department announced Tuesday that it will publish an “interim report” on its review of oil and gas leases on public lands this summer after President Biden froze new leases in January.

The report will be based in part on feedback the department receives at a virtual forum on March 25. Participants in the forum will include industry figures, labor organizations, environmental and natural resource groups.

“The federal oil and gas program is not serving the American public well. It’s time to take a close look at how to best manage our nation’s natural resources with current and future generations in mind,” Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management Laura Daniel-Davis said in a statement.

“This forum will help inform the Department’s near-term actions to restore balance on America’s lands and waters and to put our public lands’ energy programs on a more sound and sustainable conservation, fiscal and climate footing,” she added.

Biden implemented the moratorium on new leases a week into his presidency as part of a broader slate of climate and environment-related executive orders. The actions also included canceling the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline and creating a Civilian Climate Corps modeled after the Civilian Conservation Corps. The orders followed his day one order re-entering the U.S. into the Paris Climate Agreement.

The conservation advocacy group Center for Western Priorities praised the announcement in a statement Tuesday, calling it an essential first step in fully transitioning to renewable energy,

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“For too long, oil and gas companies have ripped off taxpayers while contributing to the climate crisis,” Executive Director Jennifer Rokala said in a statement. “This review sets the stage for a transition to a renewable energy economy, while ensuring communities and workers that are dependent on the boom-and-bust cycles of oil drilling are at the forefront of the solution.

The Center for Biological Diversity, however, called the planned forum insufficient and said the Biden administration should make the leasing moratorium permanent.

“The federal fossil fuel programs need to face a full environmental review now, not a one-day meeting during a pandemic with select participants. If done correctly, that will show that federal fossil fuel programs must come to an orderly end,” Taylor McKinnon, senior campaigner at the organization, said in a statement. “The Biden administration did the right thing by suspending fossil fuel leasing of our federal lands and waters. Now it needs to be made permanent.”