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# Guest column: Biden must defend his climate policies from industry attack

BY KAREN C. SOKOL  
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The offshore oil industry employs thousands of Louisiana workers.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY BLAKE INTERNATIONAL RIGS

A week after taking office, President Joe Biden issued an executive order “on tackling the

climate crisis” that includes important measures to address the crisis comprehensively and equitably. Specifically, the order directs the federal government to take a “whole of government” approach to the climate crisis that pursues economic security, ensures environmental justice, and empowers workers.

The beginning of such a plan is promising, particularly after four years under an administration that wiped the word “climate” from government websites, rolled back the Obama administration’s steps to address the crisis, and made fossil fuel production a centerpiece of its agenda.

But it’s just that — a promising beginning. And it’s already under assault. The American Petroleum Institute, the nation’s largest oil and gas lobbying group, immediately attacked the order, and particularly its directive to pause new oil and gas leasing on federal lands and offshore waters. The industry not only launched a nationwide PR campaign decrying the new leasing pause, but also filed a lawsuit challenging it.

At first blush, this strong reaction seems odd given that the federal leasing pause, like everything else in Biden's climate order, is at most the beginning of a plan to make the necessary transition away from fossil fuels. At this stage it is, after all, only a pause.

It appears baffling for other reasons too. First, the industry has already stockpiled so many federal leases that over half remain idle. Second, the bulk of the nation's oil and gas production takes place on state and private lands, which are not impacted by the order. And lastly, the industry has finally, if reluctantly, begun to publicly acknowledge the climate problem, and now even claims to be "supportive" of the Paris climate agreement's goal of net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

The federal leasing pause is a quite modest step toward meaningful climate policy aligned with the international community's Paris goals. The industry's rapid-fire and vehement protest is overblown – and inconsistent with its recent commitment to "support" those goals. So, what's the deal?

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**Joe Biden to pause oil drilling on public lands as part**

## **of plan to address climate, sources say**

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Alarmingly, the answer boils down to what got us into the climate emergency in the first place. The leasing pause will have virtually no impact on the industry for the foreseeable future, but it is incredibly important symbolically: It is an acknowledgment that the way to respond to the climate crisis is to decrease fossil fuel production. That would jeopardize the industry's core business, which remains fossil fuel production. Notably, the industry's enormous profits from fossil fuel production partly stem from federal subsidies in many forms, including leases on federal lands and waters with heavily discounted royalty rates, tax breaks, and weak regulation. Indeed, a report by the International Monetary Fund found that in recent years the U.S. government spent more on fossil fuel industry subsidies than on the defense budget.

The reality is that major oil and gas companies continue to invest in fossil fuel production at a level that puts the Paris agreement's goal of limiting global temperature rise out of reach.

That the industry's business plans are in fact not aligned with the Paris goal is not surprising, given its decadeslong and painfully successful effort to hide and deny climate science demonstrating the dangerousness of its products.

If the leasing pause's promise of ramping down fossil fuel production and thus meaningfully responding to the climate emergency is realized, the industry's assets will be stranded and its business-as-usual strategy undermined. But that is our only chance of putting the Paris goal of a habitable planet for all within reach.

With its swift attack of the leasing pause, the industry has made clear it will do everything in its power to close this critical window of opportunity. The battle lines have been drawn. The Biden administration must defend meaningful climate policy from the oil and gas industry. Our survival, as a people and a planet, depends on it.

*Karen C. Sokol is a professor at Loyola University's College of Law.*