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On The State of Our Oceans

Three years into the critical climate decade and two years into Biden's presidency, it is clear that the U.S. is back on the global stage as a climate leader. The first half of Biden's term has seen the U.S. pass some of the most ambitious climate legislation in history, particularly the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022. If implemented in full, the IRA puts the U.S. on track to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40% compared to 2005 levels by 2030. Despite the welcome transformation the Biden administration has brought to climate policy from its predecessor, there is a glaring hole in our national climate policy: our oceans. Oceans are a critical buffer against climate change, as they absorb 25% of all carbon dioxide emissions. They provide several types of ecosystems to over one million marine species. Oceans are essential for human health and public life, as well, in that they provide us with food, economic industries, and endless recreational potential.

In the last two years, the Biden administration, for reasons in and out of its control, has sanctioned the continuation of ocean-based fossil fuel exploration at a time when we need to be phasing it out entirely and quickly. In recent months our climate and oceans have withstood an onslaught of attacks. Three oil and gas drilling lease sales in Alaska's Cook Inlet and the Gulf of Mexico have been authorized as part of the IRA. Weeks ago, the administration greenlit the Willow Project, a massive and decades-long oil drilling venture on Alaska's North Slope in the National Petroleum Reserve (NPR). An on-shore drilling project, Willow's proximity to the Arctic coast will certainly impede the stability and livelihood of coastal communities and ecosystems therein. Finally, the administration's Ocean Climate Action Plan, the preeminent national strategy for ocean-based climate solutions, took only lukewarm opposition to offshore drilling. If the U.S. is to lead the charge in addressing and combating the climate crisis, we need to definitively abandon drilling for fossil fuels in our oceans. We are formally calling on the administration to authorize a National Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Program for 2023-2028 that includes no new oil and gas lease sales. The health of the planet, marine ecosystems, and coastal communities depend on it.

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), passed in August 2022, tied offshore wind development to offshore oil and gas leasing, requiring that 60 million acres of offshore land be offered up for leasing before the first offshore wind lease is sold. The Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act stipulates that the Department of Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) manage offshore oil and gas resources, which they do by auctioning leases to fossil fuel corporations that allow them to build infrastructure to extract oil and gas from the ocean floor. The IRA also mandated the sale of leases 257 and 259, leases previously canceled by BOEM, in Alaska and 261 in the Gulf of Mexico, respectively.



Each of these lease sales will result in long-term-fossil fuel infrastructure, sending the United States years back from divesting from fossil fuels and addressing the climate crisis. Including mandated oil and gas leasing in the Inflation Reduction Act was a clear concession to the fossil fuel industry and is an unmitigated disaster for our nation as we attempt to address climate change. The sale of leases 257 and 259 have seen over 3.3 million acres in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico sold to Big Oil. Unfortunately, because these sales are required by law, the Biden administration's ability to call off these sales 257 and 259 was very limited, as is his ability to do so with the upcoming lease sale 261. Congressional action alone can stop legally mandated lease sales.

On March 21, 2023, the Biden Administration released the first-ever Ocean Climate Action Plan (OCAP). The purpose of this strategic plan is to codify the U.S. whole-of-government approach to ocean-based climate action, including mitigation and adaptation activities, research in climate and ocean science, and policy recommendations. The plan is said to incorporate environmental justice considerations as well as "pave an equitable path towards climate-resilient systems, resources, communities, and infrastructure" through ocean-based climate solutions. While the Plan features historic investment in offshore wind energy production, ambitious goals to conserve U.S. waters and strict protections of marine sanctuaries, progression of Blue Carbon sequestration, all trailblazing, and reputable nature-based solutions, the OCAP fails to take a hardline stance against offshore oil and gas leasing or account for the emissions created by the Biden administration's own actions to continue ocean-based oil and gas development. Save for a paltry footnote mention of the administration's eventual goal to phase out fossil fuels entirely, the OCAP ignores one of the most prescient issues at the nexus of climate and oceans: the need to abandon disastrous drilling for oil and gas in our oceans. We asked the administration to reject offshore fossil fuel drilling in a letter backed by major environmental justice and ocean conservation organizations and in the Blueprint for Ocean Climate Action, a series of recommendations devised by nearly 100 organizations but were met with inaction. There is no more time for silence or stagnancy when it comes to the fate of the climate.

For decades, communities and ocean and climate activists have called for the protection of our oceans. Community organizations and nonprofit groups like the Rachel Carson Council and our allies have sent the White House and Department of Interior letters, mobilized public comment campaigns, conducted public opinion polls, and spread awareness about the horrific climatic, environmental, economic, and health implications of offshore drilling. Every day, we see the effects of failing to act. Bleached coral reefs, oil spills, dead zones, beached whales, and schools of dead fish litter the news.

Protecting the oceans may seem like a daunting task but we already have the solutions. We must orient climate policy around renewable energy, say goodbye to fossil fuels, and stop allowing companies like Conoco-Phillips, Chevron, and Exxon to infiltrate our legislative processes with imposing lobbying campaigns. To prevent further damage to the ocean ecosystems, coastal resilience, and the climate, the administration must act now. This means ending offshore oil and gas drilling. We are among the formidable ranks of scientists, advocates, and policymakers who agree now is the time to protect our oceans and abandon fossil fuels and the Five-Year Plan must reflect our concerns.