

January 14, 2016

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

We call on you to order the Department of the Interior to undertake immediately a programmatic environmental impact study of the climate impacts of the federal onshore oil and gas program, and to place on hold all, new federal leasing until that study is complete.

The Department of the Interior has sold leases to dirty energy companies to drill and frack one to two million onshore acres of our public lands in each year of your presidency. These leases include the right to drill lands in our National Forests and National Wildlife Refuges and lands many consider sacred. For some auctions, commercial interest was so low the Department of the Interior could not find a single bidder. In other cases, it sold the rights to our lands for as little as \$1.50 per acre annual rental fee. Just as your Administration appears poised to take long overdue steps to review the federal coal leasing program, review of oil and gas leasing is also essential.

In all, private industry now holds more than 34 million acres of oil and gas leases on our public land. Conservation of natural resources and public recreation have been pushed aside in these public places in favor of industrial development and private profit. More than three million of these acres are being held by dirty energy companies in a suspended lease state that does not require any payment for the privilege of open-ended, private speculation on public land into perpetuity. Companies are only developing about one-third of the federal leases they hold. In other words, the U.S. oil and gas industry already has more rights to exploit our public lands than they are willing or able to use for decades to come.

The federal onshore oil and gas program has never been comprehensively studied for its impacts to our climate, despite the fact that this federal program is responsible annually for emissions of more than 200,000,000 tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, or 4% of all U.S. emissions from all energy sources.

Five years ago, the Council on Environmental Quality published draft guidance on evaluating the climate change impacts of federal programs. The guidance makes clear that climate impacts from the federal oil and gas program must be studied on a programmatic level through an environmental impact statement. The CEQ guidance has never been finalized and the climate impacts of the federal oil and gas program have never been studied.

In defiance of governing statutory mandates and the urgent interest in addressing climate change, state offices of the BLM continually and consistently refuse to quantify climate emissions from oil and gas development activities, ignore the climate costs from these activities to society, and, as recently as this year, have even gone so far as to deny the basic scientific consensus that human activity is causing climate change.

Mr. President, you have championed the pressing need for climate action on the world stage and have recognized the imperative to keep some fossil fuels in the ground to leave a hospitable planet for future generations. You have heard a growing global movement deliver ever-louder calls to “Keep It in the Ground.” For the federal oil and gas program, there is a crucial step you can take today that will align an outdated energy policy with your climate policy leadership.

We, the undersigned, call on you to order the Department of the Interior immediately to develop a programmatic environmental impact statement examining the climate change impacts related to the federal onshore oil and gas program. While this study is developed, and given that these significant federal actions cannot be legally undertaken without adequate environmental study, we call on you to put all future onshore oil and gas lease sales on hold.

A programmatic study of climate impacts will provide the American public and agency decision makers with information necessary to evaluate the true costs to society of drilling and fracking millions of acres of our precious public lands. Further, such a study would evaluate alternatives that can help define how we make the transition to a future free of fossil fuels that is essential to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius, in keeping with our international commitment on climate in Paris.

Given the millions of acres already held by dirty energy companies, there is no justification for further leasing. The federal oil and gas program can withstand a leasing timeout while climate impacts are studied. With that study in hand, it will become possible for you and your successors in leadership to determine what form that program should take in a climate-constrained world.

Mr. President, it is clear now that the U.S. cannot have it both ways. We cannot pursue a 1.5°C goal or assure a 2°C limit to global warming with unbridled extraction of fossil fuels. We have to keep some fossil fuels in the ground and this is an easy, necessary first step to live up to American climate leadership. Do not sell one more acre of public lands to dirty energy companies until the climate impacts of doing so are clearly examined.

We thank you for considering our request and stand ready to support such action in any way that we can.

Sincerely,

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