

The Biden administration's offshore drilling bonanza is voluntary—and dangerous

It's time for the president's actions on fossil fuels to match his words.

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Sunlight illuminated the tendrils of the lingering oil slick off the Mississippi Delta on May 24, 2010. (Satellite photo by NASA / public domain)

In November, the Biden administration held an auction of oil and gas drilling permits for the Gulf of Mexico. It was the largest such auction in Gulf history: 80 million acres were offered up for extraction. This took place just four days after the climate summit in Scotland, where President Biden spoke plainly about the urgent need for bold action on climate change.

The Department of the Interior, the federal agency that held the auction, claimed that it had no choice. When Biden took office, his administration announced a general moratorium on new oil and gas drilling permits. But a group of states sued and won, and Biden officials claimed that this court ruling compelled them to sell the new permits.

The claim is misleading at best. *The Guardian* reports that the Justice Department issued a memo before the auction acknowledging that the ruling required only a lift on the overall moratorium—not that permits be issued at any particular rate. The administration created this offshore drilling bonanza voluntarily.

According to consumer advocacy group Public Citizen, the Biden administration has been granting more monthly drilling permits on federal land than the Trump administration did during its first three years. It's also poised to open up new drilling off the Alaskan coast later this year.

Biden campaigned *against* new drilling, onshore and offshore alike. Of course, governing is different from campaigning. Fossil fuel production and consumption are intimately related to geopolitical relations. Americans have been paying very high gas prices, which hit lower-income households particularly hard. And more broadly, the transition to a clean energy future is not simple or straightforward. This transition is well underway, but in the meantime, people still need transportation, heat, and electricity—and the supply and demand issues are intricate. A president has to consider all this and more.

But while quitting fossil fuels can't be done cold turkey, opening up new drilling sites at this scale is a huge step in the wrong direction. According to a Guardian estimate, the new Gulf permits alone will create 600 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions over 40 years. Offshore drilling brings particular dangers, too. Just in the last few years, the three biggest buyers of the new permits—Exxon, Chevron, and BP—have each had oil spills in the Gulf.

Energy supply problems are present and concrete. Climate change, on the other hand, tends to be treated as a future, abstract problem. But it isn't. It's happening now, and it's quickly getting worse. What's more, it's an existential problem for civilization, one that ultimately renders all others moot.

Activist group Earthjustice is suing to halt the new drilling permits before they go into effect next month. That's good, important work, but it wouldn't be necessary if

Biden's actions matched his words. In Scotland, on the campaign trail, and elsewhere, the president has talked a big game on climate action. It is unacceptable to quietly pursue the fossil fuel status quo while loudly proclaiming the priority of climate action—sometime, eventually. We need our leaders to govern with the same urgency that they speak.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Empty words."