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# Reforms are needed to protect our public lands

BY ANNE HANSEN, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 05/23/21 03:00 PM EDT  
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In April, President Biden kicked off his international climate summit by announcing an ambitious plan to protect our most precious resource — Mother Earth. Biden pledged to help mitigate the damage of his immediate predecessor by cutting greenhouse gases by 50 percent by 2030. If fulfilled, we could see the most effective climate-friendly policies in this very decade. And not a moment too soon.

For too long, our country has rapidly depleted our natural resources, often at the added destruction of public health, Native American rights and local communities. I'm reassured to see that this administration recognizes this dangerous trend and is proactively working to undo the damage and move forward with smart, sustainable policies — like the recent pause to new oil and gas leasing on federal public lands.

This pause is critical to improving an antiquated and broken system that negatively impacts both the taxpayer's wallet and threatens community health. In fact, in New Mexico alone there were over 218 major and over 200 minor crude oil and "produced water" spills last year due to energy extraction. Often the oil and gas companies responsible for these toxic water spills, which are a byproduct of energy extraction, receive no penalties or repercussions for the contaminated spills which can linger long after the incidents. Even more disturbing, many of these spills occur on sacred Native land, causing destruction to our nation's original communities.

For these reasons and more, I was proud to introduce to the Santa Fe Board of Commissioners a resolution in support of Biden's pause of new oil and gas leasing. The resolution asks the Biden administration to "Modernize the federal oil and gas leasing program to ensure the oil and gas companies that hold leases and extract natural resources provide a fair return to federal and state taxpayers; and develop a plan to phase out the production of fossil fuels, which are a major contributor to climate change, in a way that also supports the workers, communities, and states that currently have fossil fuel dependent economies." The resolution passed unanimously and it is why I'm advocating for these reforms on behalf of our constituents. I am appealing to the Department of Interior (DOI) and our congressional and state representatives to support much-needed reforms, including adopting a new mandate that recognizes that leasing is not required and should only be allowed if it's consistent with multiple use and sustained yield objectives, among other conservation goals.

I urge the administration to eliminate wasteful speculative leasing practices, and close loopholes that allow companies to shift clean-up costs onto taxpayers and private landowners. Furthermore, I hope these reforms force companies to stop exploiting public lands and resources and start to fairly compensate taxpayers, with rates that account for the cumulative costs of development. These reforms are necessary and urgent to protect the natural resources and residents of New Mexico and the United States.

As a 48-year resident of New Mexico, I've seen firsthand and up close the beauty of the Land of Enchantment. I've also spoken with the businesses, families and communities that rely on the land, not just for its enduring beauty, but for sustenance,

mental and physical health. These lands belong to all of us — not just the CEOs with the closest contacts in Washington. They belong to the future generations of New Mexicans, and it is the responsibility of all elected leaders to protect those lands for future families.

The damage to our climate wasn't done in a day, or even in a four-year administration, and it won't be undone quickly. With Biden's leadership and a coalition of stakeholders who represent all those concerned, we can start the long process of healing our earth and protect all that it provides. We owe that to our land, ourselves and our future generations.

*Anna Hansen is a commissioner for Santa Fe County, New Mexico.*