

OPINION

Pass the Build Back Better reconciliation now

Gill Sorg - Your view

Right now, Congress has a critical chance to fix the broken and outdated oil and gas leasing system that allows this country's resources to get relentlessly depleted at a catastrophic cost to the climate, public health, the rights of Indigenous communities, and local communities.

We must face the truth head on. The federal oil and gas leasing program is rife with wasteful speculative leasing practices and loopholes that allow companies responsible for toxic water spills to evade any penalties and shift the cleanup costs to taxpayers. The current system allows these companies to nominate lands they want to drill, purchase leases at obscenely low rates, and deprive local governments of much-needed revenue by paying outdated, low royalty rates to taxpayers. In New Mexico alone, almost 4.3 million acres are currently leased for potential development. Beyond the exploitation of resources themselves, the Indigenous communities that have witnessed their sacred land being destroyed deserve recompense.

Since I was elected to the Las Cruces City Council 2009, we have passed our own Climate Action Plan which calls for a 50 percent reduction of greenhouse gases by 2030, and 100 percent by the 2040s, which includes converting to an all-electric transportation system and phasing out natural gas use in the city. But local resources can only do so much or go so far. We need a federal commitment to provide the necessary support to make sweeping changes

throughout the state, community by community, in a way that doesn't abandon oil and gas workers and economies.

In April, President Biden pledged to help mitigate the climate consequences of the previous administration by cutting greenhouse gases in half by 2030, nine short years from now. That means effective climate policy would have to go into effect this decade — at last — but the federal oil and gas leasing program still must be overhauled to address the climate crisis, fairly compensate taxpayers and local landowners, and support communities in the transition away from fossil fuels.

Local elected leaders have a responsibility to take and support critical and logical actions to mitigate the devastating impacts of climate change by reducing our communities' carbon footprint, and I'm proud of the efforts already underway in New Mexico. But these measures, and cities across the state, would hugely benefit from climate infrastructure in the reconciliation bill. Bipartisan solutions to reform this system are ready and available. As Congress debates the reconciliation package, they must do everything in their power to ensure that loopholes get closed, waste gets eliminated, and protections for the people — not Big Oil — are codified in the final text.

The record droughts and dangerous wildfires we've seen in recent years make it impossible to misunderstand: the time for us to act on climate is now.



Gill M. Sorg is the outgoing Las Cruces city councilor for District 5 and candidate for the Doña Ana County Soil and Water Conservation District.