

OPINION > ENERGY ENVIRONMENT

The West is burning, flooding and drying up — time to update oil and gas leasing

BY ANNA PETERSON, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 04/25/22 5:00 PM ET
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Our western communities are burning, flooding and drying up. Wildfires, now year-round, are forcing people to evacuate as entire neighborhoods burn to the ground. Flooding and mudslides have overwhelmed towns and forced major highways to close. Smoke-filled air has socked in many cities for months, while the drought has dried up our rivers and caused our national forests to close. Heatwaves have caused temperatures to increase to levels never seen before, killing hundreds of people.

This isn't a disaster movie – it's devastating and real. These climate emergency events are deadly and incredibly expensive for local communities. They put a strain on already under-resourced health departments, all while harming our air quality, health, lands and waters as well as negatively impacting our tourist, outdoor and agricultural economies.

The enormity of what we are facing, coupled with the anxiety we are feeling is simply overwhelming and it's only getting worse. Regardless of party affiliation, race, gender or nationality, our climate crisis is impacting every single one of us — farmers in Iowa, preachers in Kentucky, outfitters in Montana along with nurses in Tennessee.

Some scientists say that we are decades too late to take action, but we can't lose hope for our collective future. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently said that if countries don't immediately and drastically slash their emissions from oil, natural gas and coal, we likely won't reach the goal of limiting the catastrophic impacts of climate change. We must, finally, take bold and forward-looking steps to curb our dependence and reliance on fossil fuels.

One way we can take climate action is to modernize the federal oil and gas leasing system. Fossil fuel extraction on public lands generates 25 percent of the United States' climate change causing emissions.

The Department of Interior recently announced new lease sales that include an increase in the royalty rate to 18.75 percent. This is good news because the royalty rate hasn't been updated in over 100 years — it was set at a minimum of 12.5 percent when President Woodrow Wilson signed the Mineral Leasing Act in 1920. As communities have been forced to spend limited funds on climate emergencies, the onshore leasing program has shortchanged taxpayers for decades. According to one estimate, the program's outdated royalty rate cost taxpayers \$12.4 billion in revenue between 2010 and 2019. And, according to the Government Accountability Office, raising royalty rates would provide much needed revenue for state and local governments.

President Biden promised to end oil and gas leasing while campaigning, yet he has approved more oil and gas leases in his first year in office than former President Trump did. While it is encouraging that he has increased the royalty rates, the administration must make the latest lease announcement reforms permanent and do more. If federal oil and gas leasing on public lands is going to continue as we transition to a clean energy economy, they must permanently fix the broken program to ensure that the oil and gas companies provide a fair return to federal and state taxpayers by updating federal oil and gas bonding standards and minimum bids and rents, along with ending non-competitive leasing, which allows for lands with low or no potential for oil and gas development to be leased.

Many community leaders, who do so much with so little, are taking strong action for climate and public lands protection locally. They are doing this while thoughtfully interacting with an increasingly divisive citizenry, managing their local responses to a global pandemic, dealing with overcrowding on public lands and the resulting increased infrastructure costs, grappling with a shortage of affordable housing, and addressing all of the other issues that affect their communities. They desperately need federal action to go in tandem with what they are implementing locally.

Local elected leaders and two-thirds of Americans want climate action now. National leaders need to take and support prudent and pragmatic steps to prevent more climate disasters. While I commend the Biden administration for taking this first step by raising

royalty rates, I urge it to take bold and permanent action to address the climate crisis' costly impacts that are devastating our communities.

Anna Peterson is the executive director of the Mountain Pact, a network of hundreds of local elected officials in over 80 Western U.S. mountain communities with outdoor recreation-based economies. The organization helps them speak with a collective voice on federal climate, public lands, and outdoor recreation policy.