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# The Trump Administration Is Stifling Renewable Energy on Public Lands and Waters

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By Nicole Gentile and Kate Kelly June 2020

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# Contents

- 1 Introduction and summary**
  
- 3 Analysis of the Trump administration’s approach to renewable energy development on public lands and waters**
  
- 9 Recommendations: A vision for renewable energy development on public lands and waters**
  
- 11 Conclusion**
  
- 11 About the authors**
  
- 11 Acknowledgments**
  
- 12 Endnotes**

# Introduction and summary

President Donald Trump claims to be an expert on wind energy. “I’ve studied it better than anybody I know,”<sup>1</sup> he said in a recent speech. Yet President Trump has expounded baseless claims that wind turbines cause cancer and depress property values.<sup>2</sup> By design or not, President Trump’s antipathy toward renewable energy development is reflected in his administration’s policies—from imposing tariffs to opposing tax credits—that have cost the sector jobs, stunted growth, and impeded the nation’s ability to tackle climate change through reduced power sector emissions.

Amid the global pandemic, when the renewable energy industry is experiencing significant job losses, the Trump administration has continued to exhibit equal parts neglect and hostility toward wind and solar companies and their workers. Nowhere is this dynamic more apparent than at the U.S. Department of the Interior, which has attempted to grant swift relief to an already-struggling oil and gas industry during the crisis but has made no similar overtures to the renewable energy industry operating on the same public lands and waters. To the contrary, the department has issued large, retroactive rental bills to solar and wind developers at a time when the industry can least afford them.

This Center for American Progress analysis offers new information on how—both before and during the pandemic—the administration has stymied the advancement of responsibly sited wind and solar energy projects on public lands and waters, squandering the momentum generated by the Obama administration. Specifically, the analysis grades the Trump administration’s performance in five categories that are critical to advancing renewable energy on public lands and waters, finding that the Trump administration has approved fewer renewable energy projects than the Obama administration had at the same point during its first term; eliminated the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) renewable energy permitting office and its staff; scrapped landscape-level renewable energy development plans; slowed and stopped competitive renewable energy lease sales; and given priority access to oil and gas industry lobbyists at the expense of renewable energy interests.

Beyond assessing the damage the current administration has done to renewable energy development on public lands and waters, this report offers recommendations for how an administration could jumpstart the renewable energy program at the Interior Department to advance a clean energy future that climate science demands.

## Interior Department progress on wind and solar energy development under the Obama administration

On behalf of the American public, the Interior Department manages the vast ocean expanses of the Outer Continental Shelf and 20 percent of the nation's landmass, including national parks, wildlife refuges, and other public lands. Many of these sunny deserts, windy vistas, and oceanscapes hold huge potential, if developed in the right way and in the right places, to power homes and businesses across the United States with clean, renewable energy.

Despite the energy potential, before 2009 there were no solar energy projects approved on public lands. And the Interior Department had no straightforward process whereby wind or solar energy developers could seek approval to develop onshore or offshore projects. The Obama administration undertook a major effort to accelerate the development of wind and solar energy on public lands and waters and, more importantly, to transform the Interior Department's ad hoc, nearly nonexistent renewable energy infrastructure into an enduring program. After eight years, the Obama administration had:

- Approved 60 large-scale wind, solar, and geothermal energy projects and associated transmission on Interior Department lands<sup>3</sup> that could power approximately 5 million homes when built<sup>4</sup>
- Developed a competitive renewable energy leasing program on public lands by the BLM and a framework for responsible solar energy development, including regional mitigation strategies<sup>5</sup>
- Created a "Smart from the Start" program for offshore wind leasing that identified wind energy areas with high potential and low conflict<sup>6</sup>
- Held six first-of-their-kind competitive lease sales for offshore wind in the Atlantic Ocean,<sup>7</sup> awarded 11 offshore commercial leases, and approved a right-of-way for the first commercial offshore wind farm in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

While the onshore and offshore renewable energy programs were, in many ways, still nascent at the end of its second term, the Obama administration had revolutionized the Interior Department's approach to clean energy development on public lands and waters and laid a strong foundation for the Trump administration to build upon.

# Analysis of the Trump administration's approach to renewable energy development on public lands and waters

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The COVID-19 crisis has amplified the administration's attacks on renewables

The impacts of the coronavirus on the energy sector have been severe. The renewable energy industry is expected to lose 850,000 jobs—one-quarter of all clean energy jobs—by the end of June.<sup>9</sup> The oil and gas industry, too, is experiencing massive job losses and is expected to see a 40 percent revenue decline this year.<sup>10</sup> Both industries are suffering; however, the Trump administration's uneven response to the pandemic again reveals that its thumb remains heavily on the scale for the oil and gas industry.<sup>11</sup>

Amid the pandemic, U.S. Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt has crafted policies to allow oil and gas companies operating on public lands to lower the royalty rates they pay or stop the clock on their 10-year leases.<sup>12</sup> He directed the BLM to process incoming royalty relief or lease-suspension requests within five days, and initial data suggest that employees are serving as little more than a rubber stamp for the hundreds of industry requests to pay lower royalty rates—some as low as 0.5 percent, compared with the already-low<sup>13</sup> established rate of 12.5 percent.<sup>14</sup> The Federal Reserve relaxed lending rules<sup>15</sup>—mirroring requests from the Trump administration<sup>16</sup>—that allow indebted oil and gas companies to access taxpayer-funded loans. And the White House has been systematically granting the industry's wish list<sup>17</sup>—captured in a letter from the American Petroleum Institute<sup>18</sup>—by rolling back standards to protect public health and engage communities.<sup>19</sup>

What's more, since President Trump signed Congress' first COVID-19 relief package on March 6, the administration has offered nearly 250,000 acres of public lands across the United States<sup>20</sup> and 78 million acres in the Gulf of Mexico for oil and gas leasing.<sup>21</sup> These lease sales took place against a backdrop of local communities<sup>22</sup> and organizations<sup>23</sup> calling for the suspension of all lease sales, citing poor conditions for public participation, public health concerns, and the high potential for an unfair return to taxpayers for the use of public lands and waters. As predicted, the lease sales in March and April were a flop, reflecting low demand from the oil and gas industry amid an oil glut and uncertain market.

In contrast, the Trump administration has made little effort—through rhetoric or policy—to shore up the renewable energy industry during the pandemic. Instead, in what could be interpreted as a shot across the bow, in late April, the BLM sent massive, retroactive rent bills to wind and solar companies with projects on public lands.<sup>24</sup>

The rental bills are the culmination of the Trump administration’s refusal to work with the renewable energy industry, a bipartisan set of members of Congress,<sup>25</sup> and its own advisory committee on royalty policies to ensure that wind and solar companies are charged fair and competitive rent for the use of public lands. Rather than directly address the concerns, the administration failed to issue rental bills for multiple years and then sent the companies multimillion-dollar bills at a time when they can likely least afford it.

There doesn’t appear to be a scenario in which a comparable request from the oil and gas industry would meet the same fate during the Trump administration. As Table 1 below shows, there is more than one way to demonstrate how the Trump administration has dismissed the renewable energy industry during the pandemic.

**TABLE 1**  
**A tale of two industries during the COVID-19 crisis**

Comparison of Trump administration actions related to the renewable energy and oil and gas industries since signing the first relief package

	Oil and gas industry	Renewable energy industry
<b>Royalties and rental payments collected</b>	Companies can pay lower royalties to taxpayers on their oil and gas leases and suspend their leases.	Solar and wind companies are served with large multiyear bills for rent that do not reflect repeated requests for adjustments.
<b>Acres of public lands offered through competitive lease sale</b>	245,582 acres	0 acres
<b>Acres of offshore waters offered through competitive lease sale</b>	78 million acres	0 acres
<b>Number of related Trump tweets</b>	11	0

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Land Management, “Regulatory and Process Information for Onshore Oil and Natural Gas Suspensions and Royalty Rate Reduction Applications Due to COVID-19 Impacts,” available at <https://www.blm.gov/programs/energy-and-minerals/oil-and-gas/covid-royalty-rate-reduction-guidance> (last accessed June 2020); Nichola Groom, “Trump admin slaps solar, wind operators with retroactive rent bills,” Reuters, May 18, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-interior-renewables/trump-admin-slaps-solar-wind-operators-with-retroactive-rent-bills-idUSKBN22U0FW>; Spreadsheet on file with the authors; U.S. Department of the Interior, “Interior Announces Region-Wide Oil and Gas Lease Sale for Gulf of Mexico,” Press release, February 11, 2020, available at <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-announces-region-wide-oil-and-gas-lease-sale-gulf-mexico-2>; Trump Twitter Archive, “Home,” available at <http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/archive> (last accessed June 2020).

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## Trump's cold-shoulder treatment of renewables began long before the COVID-19 crisis

Prior to the pandemic, the Trump administration rolled back the clock for renewable energy in significant ways. The administration's repeal of the Clean Power Plan that would have accelerated renewable energy development, tariffs on imported solar cells, and antagonistic stance on renewable energy tax credits have cost jobs and stunted the sector's growth.<sup>26</sup> At the Interior Department, the administration has dismantled internal infrastructure, pulled down lease sales, and stalled out planning efforts to advance responsible siting of wind and solar energy projects.

Below, the authors provide a report card on the Trump administration's approach to clean, renewable energy production on public lands and waters. A "pass" indicates that the renewable energy development has been fully supported on public lands and waters. A "needs improvement" indicates that some progress has been made, but significant barriers to responsible renewable energy development are still in place. A "fail" indicates that support for renewable energy development has effectively ground to a halt.

### Wind and solar projects: Needs improvement

The Trump administration inherited an Interior Department with a know-how to review and approve responsible wind and solar energy development, but it has allowed that muscle memory to atrophy. Onshore, the Trump administration has approved seven utility-scale solar projects—including Gemini Solar Project in Nevada, the largest solar energy project approved on U.S. public lands to date. Four of these solar energy projects were already in the pipeline when the administration took office.<sup>27</sup> By comparison, the Obama administration approved 21 major solar energy projects overall, including 11 by the same point in the first term.<sup>28</sup> This trend is also true for onshore wind energy development, where the Obama administration approved eight projects—including four by the same point in the first term—and the Trump administration has approved only one, which was already under review when President Trump took office.<sup>29</sup> External factors such as uncertain regulatory frameworks and market conditions may explain some of the slowdown, but they cannot fully account for the Trump administration's inadequate track record.

FIGURE 1

## Solar energy project approvals are down during the Trump administration

Solar project approvals under Trump and Obama administrations



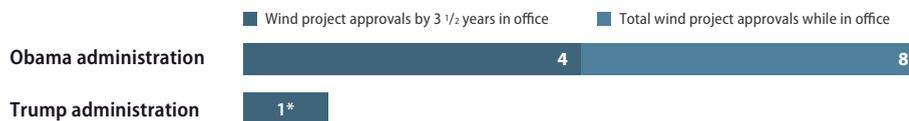
\* Four solar project approvals were already in progress when Donald Trump took office.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Land Management, "Solar Energy Data," available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20161229011739/https://www.blm.gov/programs/energy-and-minerals/renewable-energy/solar-energy/data> (last accessed June 2020). Calculations are on file with authors. The approval numbers in this figure do not include connected action projects or projects on Bureau of Indian Affairs-administered land because those data are not readily available from the Trump administration. The numbers reflect whether a proposed project was authorized by the Bureau of Land Management, not whether the project was ultimately built by the developer.

FIGURE 2

## Wind energy project approvals are down during the Trump administration

Wind project approvals under Trump and Obama administrations



\* This wind project approval was already in progress when Donald Trump took office.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Land Management, "Wind Energy," available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20161229012324/https://www.blm.gov/programs/energy-and-minerals/renewable-energy/wind-energy> (last accessed June 2020). Calculations are on file with authors. The approval numbers in this figure do not include connected action projects or projects on Bureau of Indian Affairs-administered land because those data are not readily available from the Trump administration. The numbers reflect whether a proposed project was authorized by the Bureau of Land Management, not whether the project was ultimately built by the developer.

Offshore, the Trump administration unexpectedly ordered a sweeping environmental review of wind in the Atlantic Ocean—a standard it has not applied to many oil and gas proposals. The announcement dealt a last-minute blow to several proposed offshore wind projects, including Vineyard Wind, where the project's timeline has been delayed for more than a year.<sup>30</sup> While offshore wind development's potential impacts, including to fisheries and protected species, must be considered and mitigated, the Trump administration has shown little interest in proactively resolving the issues.

### Competitive lease sales: Needs improvement

The Trump administration has failed to hold a single competitive lease sale on public lands for wind and solar energy development, despite being handed a clear blueprint for how to do so.<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that the Trump administration has managed to hold dozens of oil and gas lease sales during the same time period, offering 24.5 million acres of public lands to the fossil fuel industry.<sup>32</sup> CAP found

one instance in which BLM employees attempted to hold a renewable energy lease sale but were thwarted by a Trump official. Documents on their website show the BLM Utah finalized a plan in July 2018 to hold a 4,000-acre lease sale based on interest from a solar company, but a lease sale never occurred.<sup>33</sup> CAP's discussions with a former BLM employee point to interference from a high-level political appointee who favored grazing over solar energy development.<sup>34</sup> Rather than empowering BLM employees to balance multiple uses on public lands—the hallmark of the agency—the entire sale was quashed.

The Trump administration initially appeared supportive of offshore wind, moving forward with the two competitive wind energy lease sales for North Carolina<sup>35</sup> and Massachusetts<sup>36</sup> that were identified during the Obama administration. However, under Secretary Bernhardt, the offshore wind program has ground to a halt. The planned New York Bight lease sale, originally promised to be held in 2019, has been shelved indefinitely.<sup>37</sup> Other efforts to work with states, tribes, and stakeholders such as the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) to permit transmission, define wind energy areas, and hold competitive lease sales for offshore wind, including in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of California, have made virtually no progress under the Trump administration.<sup>38</sup>

#### Staffing: Fail

The Trump administration has hollowed out the National Renewable Energy Coordination Office at the BLM, which included a staff of seven people in headquarters and five regional coordination offices at the beginning of 2017. The current organizational chart for the BLM shows the office no longer exists,<sup>39</sup> and conversations with former BLM employees confirm that staff has been reassigned to other roles or left the agency altogether.<sup>40</sup> The office's dismantling is compounded by the ongoing reorganization of the BLM headquarters office in Washington, D.C., and the scattering of senior staff across the western United States. The sunset of the BLM's renewable energy office is significant both in symbol and practice. Without a team of headquarter-level employees focused on how to advance responsible renewable energy development, the administration has made clear that it is not a priority for public lands.

#### Access: Fail

In Washington, D.C., where access often equates to power, the Trump administration appears to have largely shut out solar and wind companies. Public calendars show that from January 2017 to May 2019, Secretary Bernhardt and five of his top aides met with the renewable energy industry only 22 times.<sup>41</sup> By contrast,

the oil and gas industry had 10 times more access to the same high-level Trump administration officials, racking up 225 meetings over the same period of time. It's unlikely that the discrepancy between the industries can be simply explained away by the number of issues they have before the department.

#### Landscape-level planning: Fail

The Obama administration worked to evolve the Interior Department's renewable energy program from a reactive, project-by-project effort toward a more thoughtful, programmatic approach that encourages development in areas best suited for renewable energy. The idea behind these areas, including Solar Energy Zones and offshore wind energy areas, is that they not only help to ensure projects are sited in areas of low environmental conflict and high energy potential but also offer developers more certainty and a speedier review process. Further work to define and build out these areas onshore or offshore, however, appears to have slowed under the Trump administration. A CAP review<sup>42</sup> of all draft and final Resource Management Plans for public lands released under the Trump administration found that the BLM has not used the planning process to identify any renewable energy opportunities, with the exception of the Dry Lake East Designated Leasing Area (DLA) that was completed as a standalone plan amendment. DLAs for wind and solar energy development on public lands are left out of all 11 draft or final Resource Management Plan that the BLM has released since 2017.

Additionally, the Trump administration has actively undermined<sup>43</sup> the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP), a comprehensive management plan for 22 million acres of state, federal, and private lands in California. Shortly after announcing that they will review and revise the carefully crafted landmark plan to facilitate responsible renewable energy development, the Trump administration canceled a mining withdrawal for 1.3 million acres in the DRECP,<sup>44</sup> opening the door to unlimited mining claims in renewable energy corridors, wildlife habitat, and significant cultural sites.<sup>45</sup>

# Recommendations: A vision for renewable energy development on public lands and waters

There are several actions an interior secretary could take to once again kickstart responsible clean energy development on public lands and waters.

## Set an ambitious goal

An administration interested in advancing renewable energy development should immediately set an ambitious goal of more than doubling current permitting to 30 gigawatts by 2030. This goal would send an important signal to the American public and to Interior Department employees that there is a place for wind and solar energy on public lands and waters. When built, these projects could generate enough clean energy to power roughly 12 million homes, based on calculations extrapolated from a recent analysis on the economic benefits of renewable energy development.<sup>46</sup>

## Designate more areas for leasing, ramp up permitting, and hold lease sales

Many of the tools needed to achieve this ambitious goal of responsibly sited renewable energy are already available. The Interior Department needs to return to the business of approving projects in areas best suited for renewable energy, including old mines or previously contaminated industrial sites.<sup>47</sup> The Interior Department should also work to identify additional areas for renewable energy leasing onshore and offshore to ensure a “Smart from the Start” approach that leads to fewer resource conflicts and streamlined siting and approvals. In identifying potential areas to prioritize for offshore wind, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) should be engaging in extensive consultation and dialogue with tribal nations to ensure that the perspectives and needs of tribal communities are addressed and incorporated into decisions; with the DOD to avoid conflicts with military training; with fishermen to ensure wind development is done in manner that safeguards the productivity of fisheries; and with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to ensure protected species aren’t unnecessarily harmed. The BLM, for its part, should dedicate significant staff time and resources to consultation with tribal nations, coordination with state and local governments on siting and transmission questions, and gathering input from scientists and local communities to identify the most appropriate areas for siting

new projects. When the Interior Department does hold lease sales, the BLM must encourage healthy competition and ensure that projects deliver a fair return to taxpayers for the use of public lands and waters.

[Reestablish and fund renewable energy offices at the Interior Department](#)  
Creating dedicated offices for renewable energy on public lands is a simple and powerful step that will lead to better coordination and better outcomes. In addition to the BLM, the interior secretary should ensure there are strong renewable energy teams at the Office of the Secretary, Office of the Solicitor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and the BOEM. To support tribes' interest in harnessing wind and solar potential on tribal trust lands, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in particular, should have a strong renewable energy office to foster economic development and energy self-sufficiency. These offices can't exist on paper only; they must have adequate staffing and resources. According to a recent analysis, the BLM's renewable energy program budget has remained mostly unchanged for the past six years, with a 16 percent dip in fiscal year 2019.<sup>48</sup>

[Champion the passage of the bipartisan Public Land Renewable Energy Development Act](#)

The Public Land Renewable Energy Development Act (PLREDA) provides one promising approach to address some technical issues remaining with the BLM's competitive wind and solar energy leasing rule, including protecting sites from nuisance mining claims and honoring rental rates for wind and solar energy projects developed before the rule took effect. The bill would also direct the Interior Department to split revenue from renewable energy leasing with local communities, establish a new fish and wildlife conservation fund, and codify a common-sense approach to responsible development of renewable energy on public lands.<sup>49</sup>

# Conclusion

Nearly four years into the Trump administration, the renewable energy industry is looking worse for the wear. At a time when the nation's leaders should be working to address climate change and rebuild a just economy that will serve all families, the Trump administration has, instead, actively undermined progress of solar and wind energy development, particularly on public lands and waters. The Trump administration's disparate treatment of the renewable energy and oil and gas industries during the COVID-19-fueled economic downturn has brought this troubling pattern into sharp focus. An administration looking to transition to a clean energy economy and create jobs should start with ramping up responsible clean energy development on U.S. public lands and waters.

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## About the authors

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## Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

## Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

## Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

