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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Obama Should Let Fossil Fuels Lie

By **LYDIA MILLET** NOV. 11, 2015

PRESIDENT OBAMA’S rejection of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline last week had the ring of a great victory for the environment. But even as he declared the United States a “global leader” in the transition to cleaner energy, he revealed a challenge that neither he nor his administration has confronted: “If we’re going to prevent large parts of this earth from becoming not only inhospitable but uninhabitable in our lifetimes,” the president said, “we’re going to have to keep some fossil fuels in the ground, rather than burn them and release more dangerous pollution into the sky.”

The logic is clear. If we don’t extract them, we can’t burn them. Even better, this is a change the president can actually make, without the approval of Congress. With the climate summit meeting in Paris near, and the Keystone decision fresh, the United States can truly take the lead on these fuels by stemming their production, not just their consumption.

Most climate debates have focused on cutting the *use* of fossil fuels. But besides a few high-profile scuffles over fuel extraction in vulnerable wild places like the offshore Arctic, political leaders have ignored fossil fuel production as a necessary piece of climate strategy.

In fact, under President Obama, oil and gas production in the United States has increased substantially. And that increase has been a major bragging point for the administration. “America is No. 1 in oil and gas,” the president boasted in his

2015 State of the Union address.

Globally, we will have to use far less of our already proven reserves of oil, gas and coal in the next 35 years if we are to even have a shot at avoiding the most disastrous warming effects. Some say we need to keep a third of the earth's oil reserves, half its gas and 80 percent of its coal unused. We need to lock up those fuels that would push us past the tipping point. And the most logical place for the United States to start is on our public lands.

About half of all potential future global warming emissions from United States fossil fuels lie in oil, gas and coal buried beneath our public lands, controlled by the federal government and owned by the American people — and not yet leased to private industry for fuel extraction.

This amount — about 450 billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalent — represents one-quarter of the total amount of carbon emissions that can be released in the coming decades if the world is to even have a chance of keeping global warming down to 2 degrees Celsius — a temperature increase that will itself result in extreme, dire consequences for people and natural systems worldwide.

Most of our fuel-bearing federal lands are either beneath the ocean along our coasts or in the interior West, and are largely controlled by the Bureau of Land Management and other federal agencies. This means the White House has the power to end public-lands extraction of fossil fuels. It wouldn't take an act of Congress — though a bill to do just that, albeit one that won't get through a Republican-controlled Senate, was recently introduced by Senators Jeff Merkley, Democrat of Oregon, Bernie Sanders, independent of Vermont, and Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont. Mr. Obama has the authority, under federal laws like the Mineral Leasing Act and Federal Land Policy and Management Act, to delay and ultimately stop new leasing of fossil fuels on public lands.

But his interior secretary, Sally Jewell, cynically dismissed a recent call by more than 400 groups and scientists asking Mr. Obama to use his authority to keep federal fossil fuels in the ground. Because we continue to use fossil fuels, she

argued, we need to keep digging them up.

Secretary Jewell's circular argument won't get us anywhere we need to go. No one in the "Keep It in the Ground" movement was suggesting the immediate cessation of fossil fuel extraction — merely an end to new leases on federal public lands. Existing leases, stretching decades into the future in some cases, already cover some 67 million acres of public land and ocean — 55 times bigger than Grand Canyon National Park — whose fuels contain the potential for up to the equivalent of 43 billion tons of carbon dioxide pollution.

Meanwhile, our grandest public lands are being torn apart by fossil fuel extraction. Oil drilling and coal mining are killing endangered wildlife, polluting rivers, creating smog over wilderness areas and blocking wildlife corridors in America's most treasured landscapes. Wyoming, home to Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Tetons, is also the country's largest coal producer and one of its largest gas drillers. Two-thirds of the state's gas-drilling rigs are on public lands in the increasingly industrialized Greater Green River Basin. Its once-magnificent Powder River Basin has been called a "national sacrifice area" by hunting and outdoor advocates because of the scarring impacts of coal, oil and natural gas extraction.

The story is the same on Front Range of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, in the canyon lands of Utah, the deserts of New Mexico and the coastal plains in Alaska: Public lands belonging to us all are being trashed for industry profits, while out of the other side of its mouth the government calls for reducing fossil fuel burning.

Mr. Obama now has more of a chance than he's ever had to live up to his long-ago campaign pledge to tackle the crisis of climate change head-on. His administration's signature achievement in that arena, the Clean Power Plan, will cut up to 870 million tons of pollution annually, when it takes full effect in 2030; a halt to new public fuel leases would take up to 450 billion tons of that pollution off the table immediately. The president can, and should, take this crucial step to both preserve our heritage lands and get us on the path to a safer climate future.

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