Ocean Conservancy

Ocean-Climate Actions to Support the Biden-Harris Decarbonization Plan

U.S. and International Ocean-Based Mitigation for the First 100 Days

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President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris ran for office with a progressive climate platform that pursues economic recovery, social justice, and a 100% clean future simultaneously, recognizing their interdependence. As we face increasingly devastating climate impacts—from extreme events such as wildfires and hurricanes to slow-onset events such as sea level rise and acidification—ambitious climate action could not come at a more critical time.

Ocean-based climate solutions can help the new Administration achieve its decarbonization goals. Overall, ocean solutions—from scaling up offshore renewable energy to reducing carbon pollution from shipping—can supply an estimated 6% to 21% of the emissions reductions necessary globally to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius over preindustrial levels (1).

This brief outlines how ocean solutions can support key domestic and international elements of the Biden-Harris decarbonization plan, with a focus on the first 100 days of the Administration (2–4). The report "Action Agenda for a Blue-Green Future: U.S. Federal Ocean-Climate Recommendations for 2021" details related actions with a focus on the entire term (5).

U.S. Decarbonization

The Biden-Harris Administration will have the monumental challenge—and moral responsibility—of setting the country on a course for rapid and economy-wide decarbonization in the face of years of environmental rollbacks and an economic crisis. Recognizing this, the Biden-Harris climate plan includes the goal of net-zero emissions by 2050 as an overarching principle and aims to create a 100% clean energy economy and millions of clean energy jobs.

Achieving this vision means implementing an "all-of-the-above" climate approach, with policies to reduce future emissions across sectors and to reduce current atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. Ocean solutions should play an integral role. Shipping and ports initiatives, for example, can support transportation targets; offshore wind initiatives can support electricity targets; and "blue carbon" initiatives can support targets on natural climate solutions.

Transportation

- The Biden-Harris climate plan aims to reduce greenhouse gas pollution from the transportation sector, including by creating fuel economy standards to ensure all new light- and medium-duty vehicle sales are zero-emissions. It also aims to modernize transportation infrastructure.

Shipping and ports are key to "greening" the transportation sector. Overall, shipping emissions are equivalent to the national emissions of a G7 country. The Biden-Harris Administration can work to reduce global shipping emissions through ambitious leadership at the International Maritime Organization (see section on global decarbonization below) as well as meaningful action at home. Measures to pursue in the first months of the Administration include:

- **Directing agencies to prioritize and coordinate the decarbonization of shipping and ports (EPA, MARAD, USCG).** The Ocean Resource Management Subcommittee, in coordination with the Committee on the Marine Transportation System and consultation with stakeholders, should develop an implementation plan and coordinate recommendations for decarbonizing U.S. shipping and ports, including mandating and rolling out onshore power where available.
- **Working to create a Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) scheme for vessels entering the U.S. EEZ (EPA, USCG).** Collection of data on current fuel consumption and emissions is key. Transparent reporting should be made mandatory for all ships calling on U.S. ports.

Electricity

- One of the main climate targets of the new Administration is to create carbon-free electricity by 2035, which is a key component of its job creation and economic opportunity plan. To achieve this target, the plan promotes measures including an energy efficiency and clean electricity standard, tax incentives, and the installation of "tens of thousands of wind turbines—including thousands of turbines off our coasts." It includes the day-one action of creating programs to "develop renewables on federal lands and waters with the goal of doubling offshore wind by 2030."

Dramatically upscaling renewable energy—particularly offshore wind—is key to achieving this transformation in the U.S. electricity sector and creating clean energy jobs. (There are currently only two operational offshore wind projects in the United States, both pilot-scale, with 42 MW total capacity.) Strengthening planning, engagement, permitting, and monitoring practices will help mitigate or avoid negative consequences of wind infrastructure construction, and will provide the increased certainty developers need to deploy offshore wind at the necessary scale. Measures to pursue in the first months of the Administration include:

- **Addressing power transmission for offshore renewable energy (FERC, BOEM, DOE).** Permitting and siting processes for offshore transmission lines, offshore substations, and onshore interconnection points within the grid should be fully analyzed as part of a comprehensive national offshore wind transmission plan.
- **Committing to advancing deployment of sustainably sited offshore wind projects through agency actions that enhance permitting certainty, strengthen stakeholder and review processes, and mitigate environmental impacts (OSTP, CEQ, BOEM).** There should be direction to federal agencies, including but not limited to BOEM and led by the Ocean Policy Committee's Ocean Resource Management Subcommittee, to review the regulatory process and timeline and develop specific recommendations that would increase certainty for wind developers and ensure conservation of ecosystem health. There should be robust Tribal and stakeholder engagement including frontline communities starting early in

the permitting process and continuing during construction and operational phases.

- **Funding science and directing federal agency engagement (NOAA).** Working with Congress, the Administration should seek to support the science and federal agency engagement necessary to minimize any environmental impacts from offshore wind by adequately funding NOAA Fisheries Science Centers, Integrated Ocean Observing System (IOOS), and Regional Ocean Data Portals and associated Regional Ocean Partnerships.

Oil and Gas

- The Biden-Harris climate plan will ban permitting of new oil and gas on public lands and waters and will require ambitious methane limits for oil and gas. The new Administration has also committed to creating a "just transition" by supporting the communities that have driven the fossil fuel-powered industrial revolution.

Offshore oil and gas activities create multiple threats to the ocean, not only through climate impacts but also through high levels of vessel traffic and potential spills that can devastate ecosystems, resources, and communities. Measures to pursue in the first months of the Administration include:

- **Revoking Executive Order (EO) 13795, *Implementing an America-First Offshore Energy Strategy* (EOP).** Executive Order 13795 established a policy of maximizing offshore oil and gas exploration and development, expedited consideration of permits for seismic surveys, and authorized rollbacks of critical offshore safety rules. In revoking EO 13795, the President should ensure the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area is reinstated, along with Obama-era withdrawals of OCS planning areas.
- **Discarding the 2019-2024 Draft Proposed Program for OCS Leasing (BOEM).** The administration should cease development of the 2019-2024 OCS Leasing Program and announce its intent to develop a new five-year program for 2022 to 2027. The new program should schedule no new OCS oil and gas leases in Planning Areas along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, in the Eastern Gulf of Mexico (GOMESA Moratorium Area), and in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas, Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, Bering Sea and Bering Strait.

Nature-Based Solutions

- The Biden-Harris climate plan aims to create jobs through a Civilian Climate Corps, which, among other activities, will protect and restore near-shore ecosystems to defend coastlines, support biodiversity and fisheries, and store carbon. It also aims to conserve 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2030 (the "30x30" goal).

Protecting marine ecosystems, such as seagrasses, salt marshes, and mangroves, that store large amounts of "blue carbon" is a critical part of avoiding additional carbon emissions. Marine protected areas and other conservation measures have mitigation potential if they are designed to prevent the loss—or allow for the restoration, migration, and expansion—of these ecosystems. They also can provide ecosystem and coastal community adaptation benefits that address impacts of sea level rise, storm threats, and changing fisheries. Measures to pursue in the first months of the Administration include:

- **Seat an Interagency Working Group on blue carbon (NOAA, EPA, NSF, NASA, USGS, USFWS, NPS, BIA, SI, USACE, USDA, DOE, DOD, DOT, FEMA).** HR 5589, the Blue Carbon for our Planet Act, intends to establish an Interagency Working Group (IWG) focused on blue carbon system mapping and restoration planning. This IWG should be created immediately, and its charge should be broadened to include the following foundational tasks:
  - **Adopting a zero net loss goal.** The new Administration should direct agencies to prevent the destruction or degradation of blue carbon systems making limited exceptions only in extreme cases when no reasonable alternatives exist, and requiring effective compensatory restoration to replace, rehabilitate, or acquire the ecological and functional equivalent of lost systems. The IWG can help implement those principles evenly across agencies.
  - **Adopting a unified approach for blue carbon system quantification and planning.** All agencies that have the authority to interact with or alter blue carbon systems (e.g., USACE, DOI, USGS, EPA, NOAA) should use the same methods to quantify their annual carbon storage and total sequestration. The IWG can help identify the appropriate method and implement it across agencies.

- **Developing and implementing an ocean-smart "30x30" strategy (CEQ, OSTP, DOC, DOI, EPA, DOD, DOS, DOE, DHS).** The new administration should consider the different starting point, challenges, and opportunities involved in achieving this goal in the ocean versus on land, including how to achieve a geographically and biologically representative network of protected areas that maximizes climate benefits. In addition, it should ensure inclusive and equitable processes for establishing protected areas. These should respect Indigenous rights, include provisions for Tribal-led marine protection mechanisms, consider public access opportunities, and provide meaningful opportunities for public and stakeholder engagement.

For in-depth background on marine protected areas as a climate tool, see (6).

Global Decarbonization

The global emissions trajectory is far off course to meet the vision of the Paris Agreement. Even taking into account current pledges, temperatures are on track to warm an additional 2 degrees Celsius by the end of the century (7). To address the climate crisis, a step change in global climate ambition is critical this year—when the second round of national climate goals under the Paris Agreement are due—and in the future. It is possible for U.S. leadership to help drive this change.

Advancing a "blue-green" foreign policy could be an early win in climate diplomacy for the new Administration. There are several opportunities in the scope of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) for the United States to adopt a leadership role to support global decarbonization.

U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change

- The Biden-Harris climate plan is committed to rejoining the Paris Agreement and prompting the world to increase its climate ambition. As a first order of climate diplomacy, it can also be expected to formulate its national climate target (Nationally Determined Contribution, or NDC) for 2030.

In international fora, ocean and climate issues historically have been siloed. Over the past several years, however, there has been a growing movement to ensure that the climate regime takes account of ocean impacts and maximizes sustainable ocean-based mitigation. Opportunities to pursue in the first months of the Administration include:

- **Leading the effort to create an ocean outcome at the U.N. climate summit in 2021 (DOS).** During the last summit (COP25), Parties to the Paris Agreement mandated an initial dialogue to discuss how to strengthen ocean-based mitigation and adaptation. There is now an opportunity to lead the effort to take the outcomes of the dialogue forward to a COP26 decision (8).

- **Formulating U.S. ocean-climate commitments to include within or alongside its NDC (DOS).** Ocean-based commitments could bolster the overall U.S. emissions reduction target. Options include targets on specific solutions included in this brief, such as achieving zero loss of blue carbon ecosystems or scaling up offshore renewable energy (8).

- **Leading ocean-climate ambition coalitions (DOS).** Given that the UNFCCC has 197 Parties and stringent decision-making rules, it is the role of smaller coalitions to set a global direction of travel for ambitious action. The Pacific Rim Ocean-Climate Action Partnership (PROCAP) serves as an ambition coalition for ocean-climate stewardship and had its soft-launch at COP25; the United States has an opportunity to become a founding member alongside other major Pacific economies for a formal launch at COP26 (8).

International Maritime Organization

- The Biden-Harris climate plan aims to promote "enforceable international agreements to reduce emissions in global shipping."

The UNFCCC has for a long time deferred to the IMO to address the regulation of international shipping emissions. Given that the shipping sector is a significant driver of climate change, the new Administration should become a leading force for ambition in the context of the IMO. Opportunities to pursue in the first months of the Administration include:

- **Committing to a global goal of zeroing out shipping emissions in line with limiting warming to 1.5 degrees C (DOS).** To have a chance of success, this would mean reducing shipping emissions 100% by 2035.

- **Supporting high ambition proposals for greenhouse gas reduction within the IMO (DOS, USCG).** The Administration should play a

leadership role in directing the global shipping industry towards full decarbonization. In 2018, the IMO adopted the Initial IMO strategy on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from ships. The Administration should direct the U.S. delegation to support short-term actions that immediately reduce the carbon footprint of shipping, such as setting an operational life-cycle CO_2 equivalent (CO_2e) intensity standards for vessels.

For more detail on using ocean solutions to support a robust climate foreign policy, see (8).

Justice as an Overarching Principle

- Justice appears throughout the Biden-Harris climate plan, which focuses on the need to address historical environmental injustice by ensuring that communities on the frontlines of pollution and climate impacts receive the first benefits of the clean energy transition. For example, the plan aims for 40% of the benefits of investments in a clean economy to go to disadvantaged communities. The Biden plan also focuses on investments to support communities—such as coal communities—that powered U.S. industrialization.

Justice should be a consistent pillar of ocean-climate action as well. Not only should frontline communities be a priority for climate protection, but local community members should be a priority for engagement and employment. Coastal blue carbon restoration projects, for example, should be sited where disadvantaged communities are least prepared for climate change and have lost access to nature and economic opportunities. Job training and workforce development initiatives for local communities would help ensure the benefits of these projects do not miss those most in need. A similar approach can be instituted for many of the recommendations above, including training and community engagement in decarbonizing shipping and ports as well as manufacturing, siting, installing and, maintaining offshore renewable energy.

Citations

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