

POLITICS

# Joe Biden Broke His 2020 Pledge on Fracking. Good.

*The president was right to promote fracking on public lands. The technique for extracting natural gas reduces reliance on dirty coal, builds a bridge to a renewable energy future, and hurts Putin.*

by **Bill Scher**

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In this April 17, 2019, photo a Latshaw Drilling Rig operates on a Diamondback oil and gas location in Midland County, Texas. Fracking reduces reliance on dirty coal and builds a bridge to a renewable energy future. (James Durbin/Reporter-Telegram via AP)

**I**n 2020, presidential candidate Joe Biden [proposed](#) banning new oil and gas permitting on public lands and waters. During a debate with Senator Bernie Sanders, [Biden pledged](#) “no new fracking,” which

meant—according to his campaign aides [afterward](#)—no new gas permits on federal lands, as such permits would inevitably involve fracking.

That’s not what happened. After Biden took office, his administration kept issuing oil and gas permits and did so at a [slightly faster pace](#) than his predecessor Donald Trump. The health care and energy bill Biden signed last year—the awkwardly named [Inflation Reduction Act](#)—yokes oil and gas lease auctions to wind and solar projects on federal lands and blesses such leases in the Gulf of Mexico and Alaska’s Cook Inlet.

More consequentially, in the past year, the Biden administration dramatically increased liquid natural gas (LNG) exports to Europe. As reported by [The Guardian](#), Biden “paved the way for new pipelines and export facilities, established a new taskforce to boost gas exports to Europe, and approved \$300 million in funding to help build out gas infrastructure on the continent.” The result? [America now provides Europe with half of its LNG](#). In contrast, Russian oil and gas exports to Europe have been slashed in half. According to [Politico](#), the shift in Europe’s energy sources “played a huge role in keeping the European alliance together over the past year” in support of the Ukrainian resistance.

Is fracking saving the world from dictatorship while dooming the world to suffer from global warming? Not according to data from the Environmental Protection Agency. Last year, the EPA determined that the [United States exceeded Barack Obama’s goal](#) of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 17 percent (from 2005 levels) by 2020. In his 2014 State of the Union address, Obama deemed natural gas “the bridge fuel that can power our economy with less of the carbon pollution that causes climate change.” Natural gas has done exactly that. Coal use peaked in 2007, making up [48.5 percent of our electricity sources](#); as of 2021, that is down to 21.8 percent. Over that same span, natural gas is now the most significant source, having grown from 21.6 percent to 38.3 percent of the mix.

Also important, though Obama is often criticized for his response to Vladimir Putin’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Democratic president quickly recognized the potential of fracked natural gas to contain Russian imperialism. As [The New York Times](#) reported shortly after the Crimean invasion, before fracking dramatically increased America’s natural gas supply, the George W. Bush administration considered *importing* Russian natural gas. With newfound energy independence, Obama shifted tack: “The [Obama] administration’s strategy is to move aggressively to deploy the advantages of its new resources to undercut Russian natural gas sales to Ukraine and Europe, weakening such moves by Mr. Putin in future years.” Eight years later, Biden reaped the rewards of his old boss’s wisdom.

Obama’s endorsement of fracking was far from universally embraced. Writing for *Grist* in September 2014, environmental movement leader and author Bill McKibben worried that “inexpensive fracked gas” would scuttle wind, solar, and the like instead of bridging us to a renewable energy economy. “[I]f we’re replacing coal with gas,” McKibben argued, “it means we’re not replacing it with something else.”

But as tautological as that sounds, [the data](#) shows otherwise. As the share of electricity the U.S. derives from natural gas nearly doubled between 2007 and 2021, the percentage from renewable energy more than doubled, from 8.5 percent to 20.1 percent. Natural gas is accelerating the decline of coal during this transition phase, during which renewable energy is growing but can't yet carry our entire load.

McKibben also called attention to the problem of leaked methane that can result from fracking. Methane doesn't linger in the atmosphere for hundreds of years like carbon dioxide, but, while present, traps far more heat than it does. How serious is the methane leak problem from fracking? Is it enough of a problem to negate the benefits of declining coal use and the surge in fracking? The uncomfortable answer is we don't know.

[According to EPA](#), methane emissions from natural gas systems have been down 11 percent since 2005. But as [Bloomberg](#) reported last year, the EPA may be undercounting: "Companies aren't obligated to monitor infrastructure physically, and federal regulators rarely collect data of their own. The disclosure comes down to companies simply tallying figures—for example, how many gas wells they have—and applying an outdated formula developed by the EPA that assigns an assumed emissions rate."

Does that mean that fracking is too big a risk to the climate? No, it means we must get better at detecting emissions and plugging leaks. The good news is that [recently developed technology](#) has vastly improved methane emission detection, from satellite imaging to airborne hyperspectral cameras to handheld devices. The challenge is how to deploy it comprehensively.

The Biden administration has a plan, proposed in November, called the ["super-emitter response program."](#) Under the proposal, government agencies alongside "approved third parties with expertise in remote methane detection technology" track down major leaks and force swift action. An estimated [4 percent of methane emitting sites account for half of all methane emissions](#). Once identified and notified, a super-emitter would have five days to do its own inspection and [10 days](#) to fix any problems.

The proposal is not a done deal. The EPA will issue a final rule later this year. Meanwhile, the oil and gas industry is trying to shape the rule, raising concerns about using third parties to detect leaks, as they fear "industry harassment" by activists. As one lobbyist told [E&E News](#), "You could tie up a company with false alarms, you could tie up a company with false reports or false monitoring." But the proposal wouldn't allow just anyone to detect methane. The EPA would certify monitors and could decertify anyone performing shoddy work. Without outside monitors, EPA most likely wouldn't have a sufficient workforce to perform the necessary testing.

Methane leaks aren't the only problem with natural gas. Another is earthquakes. The fracking process dredges up vast amounts of deep underground contaminated water, and gas companies inject the water back underground with rock formations, which can put pressure on fault lines. A study published last year by the

Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas at Austin found the [annual number of earthquakes in Texas between 2017 and 2021 has jumped from 26 to 209](#). Furthermore, concerns about fracking chemicals and [childhood leukemia](#) were heightened last year after a scientific study found those living within 1.25 miles of a fracking well were twice as likely to contract the disease than those who lived farther away.

Still, the question is not whether fracked natural gas is the perfect fuel but whether fracked natural gas is better than coal and a good enough bridge while we ramp up our renewable energy capacity. With proper regulation, the answer is yes. We can mandate greater distances between fracking wells and residencies. We can recycle unearthened water instead of injecting it back into the ground, which [Texas companies](#) have begun to do. And we can detect and plug methane leaks.

When Biden took his position against new natural gas permits on federal lands, fracking was one of the few issues [dividing](#) the Democratic presidential primary field, with most portraying the practice negatively. Senators Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, along with Governor Jay Inslee of Washington, wanted to ban fracking altogether. Senator Kamala Harris and former South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg (both now part of the Biden administration) suggested they would ban some fracking immediately and move to ban it all. Senator Amy Klobuchar and now-Senator John Hickenlooper stood out as Democrats willing to acknowledge natural gas's value as a bridge fuel.

But the politics of fracking have shifted within the Democratic Party. For example, in 2018, during his run for Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania, John Fetterman said, [“I don’t support fracking at all, and I never have.”](#) To win his 2022 U.S. Senate race, he said that with new regulations in place, [“I support fracking.”](#) Democratic voters did not flinch and stood squarely behind him.

Just before Fetterman’s flip-flop, a massive spike in gasoline and other fuel prices in the summer of 2022 helped drive Biden’s job approval to its nadir (36.8 percent on July 21 in the [Real Clear Politics](#) average). The public anger was a stark reminder that price hikes and supply disruptions are political poison. Yes, it would be wonderful if we could move to 100 percent renewable energy at breakneck speed. But if we tried that without bridge fuels keeping prices reasonable, a backlash would propel conservatives into office who would bury any Green New Deal dreams for good.

One Democrat presumably hoping to rekindle the fracking debate is Biden’s new Democratic challenger, self-help author [Marianne Williamson](#). Her latest campaign platform pledges to “ban all fracking operations.” Moreover, she would undermine European support for Ukraine by “end[ing] the use of long-term LNG projects for diplomatic support.” (She has expressed support for aiding Ukraine militarily, though not with a [“blank check.”](#))

She could find allies among environmental groups who have continued their fight to ban fracking despite

recent developments in Ukraine. In October, a [coalition led by Sierra Club](#) demanded the Department of Energy establish rules that would make it easier to deny LNG export projects. That coalition didn't address what that might do to Ukraine.

A separate October report from [Public Citizen](#) called for "no new liquefied natural gas export terminals [to] be approved by the U.S. government." The report acknowledged that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has upended global energy markets but argued that the invasion "made clear that the boom in U.S. production and exports has not removed Americans from the wild swings of energy markets." Therefore, "in the long run, we must as a planet wean ourselves from our dangerous dependence on fossil fuels that have sowed turmoil and chaos."

That's true ... *in the long run*. But the long run doesn't commence in just a few years, and the threat of militaristic imperialism from the petrol-state of Russia will not disappear in the short run. For the time being, the free nations of the world need America to build sufficient infrastructure to export natural gas, just as the planet needs America to regulate natural gas and stop methane leaks properly.

For now, rank-and-file Democrats appear to have grasped these political realities. They didn't punish Fetterman for his reversal last November, and they aren't punishing Biden now for breaking his permitting pledge. Hopefully, that pragmatic attitude will sustain and resist attempts to needlessly re-open the Democratic divide over fracking.

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