

May 18, 2020

Governor Gavin Newsom
California Legislature
California State Capitol
Sacramento, California 95814

Re: Protect workers and communities, not fossil fuel polluters

Dear Governor Newsom and California State Legislators,

Thank you for your leadership on COVID-19. We recognize that this is a challenging time for everyone and applaud your bold, science-based leadership to protect Californians. As you consider options to address the economic damage and individual hardship created by COVID-19, we request that you continue this important work by using your authority to protect people rather than polluters. Specifically, we urge you to focus relief and stimulus funds on actions that promote equity and support healthy communities free of pollution, and that you reject any measure that includes giveaways or waivers for fossil fuel corporations or their executives. Workers in the fossil fuel industry, like workers in every industry, should receive direct relief during this crisis, and should receive transition assistance going forward as oil and gas production and use in California continues its inevitable decline. However, there should be no funding for fossil fuel corporations, executives and shareholders, and recovery funds must not be used to promote fossil fuel production or infrastructure.

A just rebuilding for California can address the interlinked COVID-19, climate, health, environmental justice, housing, and economic crises we face. These linkages were illustrated starkly by a recent Harvard study showing that even a small increase in long-term exposure to PM2.5 pollution leads to a large increase in the COVID-19 death rate.¹ This is because air pollution lowers the body's ability to fight off infections and worsens reactions to viruses in people with other health challenges like asthma. Most of the state's oil and gas production is located in areas with the worst air quality and highest rates of childhood asthma, and predominantly in low-income communities of color. Oil and gas operations have been deemed essential and allowed to continue operating during the pandemic, although they are major contributors to the air pollution in these communities.

As the fossil fuel era comes to its inevitable end, impacted workers and communities can be protected through just transition support. With rapid and large-scale rebuilding efforts that propel a just, clean economy and hasten the end of the fossil fuel era, we can boost our economy through the creation of thousands of family sustaining jobs while addressing the unjust and interlinked crises we now face.

¹ Wu, Xiao et al., Exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States, Harvard University (2020), available at <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>.

The immediate response must focus on providing emergency relief directly to the workers and communities who need it.

We support policies that provide wage replacement -- with no strings attached and no means testing -- directly to workers who have lost their jobs and to those working drastically reduced hours, including ongoing financial relief for undocumented Californians who have lost work but are excluded from unemployment benefits. We also support broadening the eligibility of the earned income and childcare tax credits to include all immigrants.

The dramatic increase in California's unemployment rate means many people will continue to lose their health coverage. We support proposals that ensure high-quality healthcare for everyone, including expanding Medi-Cal to all workers regardless of immigration status.

For those who remain employed, the state must ensure appropriate safety precautions are in place for frontline workers and make adequate sick leave available in all essential industries, so that workers who are ill can self-isolate without fear of missing a paycheck or losing their job. Far too many workers at hospitals, assisted-living facilities, grocery stores, warehouses, and other essential work sites are risking their lives because employers are failing to protect their health and safety in the workplace.

In addition, not all essential workers are earning enough to make ends meet. It is time for the state to invest relief money to ensure that all frontline workers are paid living wages, starting with the implementation of next year's minimum-wage increase.

Policies should also strengthen the right to workplace organizing and enhance critical protections for all workers, including farmworkers and domestic workers. The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of strong workers' rights so that employers do not endanger their employees or the public in pursuit of profits.

There must be absolutely no funding for fossil fuel corporations, executives and shareholders nor any measures that would promote fossil fuel production or infrastructure.

The fossil fuel industry is trying to use this moment to cash in on emergency relief legislation, as demonstrated by the outcome of the federal bailout, which could allow billions in relief funds that should go directly to people in need to instead be redirected to coal, oil and gas companies and fossil fuel-intensive industries. This is outrageous. The fossil fuel industry already receives billions in subsidies, legal exemptions, lax enforcement of environmental, health, and safety laws, and many other types of special treatment. Fossil fuel executives have always sought to maximize their profits at the expense of people and planet. As the world's largest polluters, they have held back progress for far too long by lying about the science and blocking support for clean energy.

Relief funds that are supposed to support people, workers and small businesses must not be allowed to go to fossil fuel corporations, and there must be an absolute prohibition on further hand-outs of any kind to the fossil fuel industry and executives. Whether in the form of direct cash payments; low-interest loans; waiver or non-enforcement of environmental, health, and safety laws; new tax subsidies; or any additional giveaways— all such requested hand-outs to polluters must be denied.

Recovery funds should provide long-term security to workers and communities impacted by the needed transition away from fossil fuels.

Recovery efforts must include substantial investments in workers and communities who have powered the fossil-fuel-based economy to this point, and in those who have borne the brunt of its devastating health and economic harms. Dignified, family-sustaining jobs can be created through support for targeted regional economic development, training programs, high-road labor standards, local hire requirements, project labor agreements and the right to organize.

The oil and gas industry in California has been in decline for many years. The COVID-19 crisis will accelerate this trend, particularly as the economic downturn combines with the industry’s history of debt accrual and mismanagement. California oilfield workers already face layoffs, with worse yet to come. The need has never been greater for thoughtful, immediate actions that will lay the groundwork for the future energy transition.

In addition to the emergency relief provided to all workers affected by the COVID-19 crisis, we call on you to provide immediate and long-term support for workers in the oil and gas industry and the communities impacted by the decline in extraction in California. We can better protect oil and gas industry workers for the long haul through a planned phaseout that invests in a just, collaborative, and deliberative transition to a sustainable economy. The state should ensure that every worker facing displacement in the energy transition is provided with guaranteed pensions and health benefits; appropriate retirement and early retirement options; guaranteed re-employment in jobs with family-sustaining wages; a bridge of income, retraining, and relocation support; and other assurances they can continue to provide for their families in the move to an economy beyond fossil fuels.

Compelling oil companies to meet their environmental remediation obligations is an important part of the just transition. Oil and gas wells that have not been properly secured, plugged, or remediated pose grave threats to our water supplies, environment, and public safety. A recent report from the California Council on Science and Technology has shown that California taxpayers already face a half-billion-dollar price tag to remediate “orphaned” and likely orphaned wells – those that have been abandoned by the company responsible for their cleanup. The estimated cost to secure and remediate all 107,000 wells in California is more than \$9 billion — and that does not count the costs of water contamination and other harms from abandoned

wells. Oil and gas operators are legally responsible for these costs, but often walk away, leaving dangerous unsecured wells, forgoing the employment opportunities provided by this work, and dumping the costs on the public.

California must accelerate the remediation of existing wells in conjunction with a halt to permits for new wells and a well managed phase-out of existing extraction. Oil companies must be held accountable for the costs of remediation. The oil industry's repeated assertion that it needs rollbacks of existing environmental, health and safety protections due to the COVID-19 downturn shows that industry lacks the intention to remediate new wells drilled today, and that many will lack the ability to do so when the time comes.² This is just one more reason why the state must halt the approval of new oil and gas wells.

Communities that rely on tax revenue from fossil fuel production and processing for critical public services should receive tax-base-replacement assistance during the transition. In addition, economic development initiatives should be targeted to these communities to diversify local economies and provide opportunities to workers who never had access to oil and gas jobs in the first place. The COVID-19 crisis is demonstrating the need for additional public-health workers, including local entry-level workers, to assist in the immediate needs of case finding, contact tracking, and community education, as well as longer term work of community-level disease prevention and health promotion.

Governor Newsom and state leaders, you have an incredible opportunity to place California as a global leader for both addressing COVID-19 and making the needed transition away from fossil fuels. The climate crisis allows for no further delay, and we cannot afford any actions that would provide additional subsidies or funding of any kind for fossil fuel corporations or that would promote fossil fuel production or infrastructure.

We need relief measures that protect people and help create a more just, equitable, and sustainable economy as we close the book on fossil fuels. We are looking to you for this leadership.

Thank you for your consideration,

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² Goldberg, Ted, California Oil Producers Fighting Newsom Proposal for Stronger Oversight, KQED, April 29, 2020, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11812455/california-oil-producers-fighting-newsom-proposal-for-stronger-industry-oversight>

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