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NEWS ANALYSIS

Obama Sketches Energy Plan in Oil



Brendan Smialowski for The New York Times

President Obama signed a presidential memorandum regarding fuel-efficiency standards in the Rose Garden on Friday.

By JOHN M. BRODER
Published: May 21, 2010

WASHINGTON — There is very little upside for the Obama administration in the ecological and economic disaster unfolding in the Gulf of Mexico. The government has come under sharp criticism for underestimating the size of the discharge and for coddling the [oil](#) industry for too long.

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As the oil spill reaches land, we would like your updates and photographs of what you're seeing. Photos are optional but recommended.

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Until now, perhaps distracted by the critics or because it did not appear that his overall energy agenda was moving forward, [President Obama](#) has not made use of the disaster in an overtly political way.

But on Friday — a full month after the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon — he made clear that he also was not going to let the moment go to waste, announcing plans to impose stricter fuel-efficiency and emissions standards on cars and, for the first time, on medium- and heavy-duty trucks.

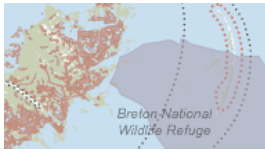
He said the oil gushing from the crippled BP well in the gulf highlighted the need to move

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John Moore/Getty Images

The boot of a Greenpeace activist on a Louisiana beach.

away from dirty and dangerous fossil fuels toward a cleaner energy future. And he signaled that he intended to use the accident to continue to push his broader policy priorities, including legislation that would put a price on climate-altering emissions and increased federal aid for American industries in the global race to dominate the clean energy technology sector.

“We know that our dependence on foreign oil endangers our security and our economy,” Mr. Obama said in a Rose Garden announcement. “And the disaster in the gulf only underscores that even as we pursue domestic production to reduce our reliance on imported oil, our long-term security depends on the development of alternative sources of fuel and new transportation technologies.”

Put more starkly: the road Mr. Obama is sending us on to his dreamed-of carbon-free future will be slick with oil for many years to come.

[Friday's announcement](#) extended rules on exhaust reduction for cars and light-duty trucks and proposed new greenhouse gas pollution limits for medium- and heavy-duty trucks. The new rules build on an agreement the administration reached with automakers a year ago. Mr. Obama was able to broker that deal by taking advantage of existing executive authority and the near-desperate desire of the struggling auto companies for a single national fuel-efficiency standard, rather than a patchwork of conflicting state and federal rules.

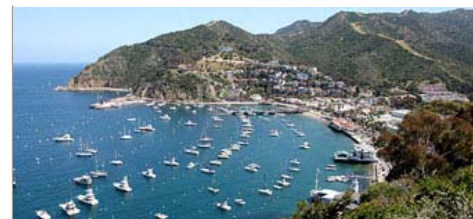
Mr. Obama faces a much steeper path to an agreement limiting carbon dioxide emissions from other sectors of the economy, including electric power companies and heavy manufacturers. That will require a negotiated deal with a variety of regulation-averse industries like coal and oil and the lawmakers who represent their interests.

There is no Rose Garden ceremony in sight for that fundamental remaking of the American economy.

There are limits to what the president can do unilaterally, and, as the president himself has acknowledged, getting 60 votes to pass a sweeping energy bill through the Senate will require significant concessions on nuclear power, coal and, yes, [offshore drilling](#).

“This is a small but commendable step,” said Michael Levi, an energy and [climate change](#) expert at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#). “The president should indeed be using the moment to focus people on the need to reduce U.S. dependence on oil, foreign and domestic,” he wrote in an e-mail message.

“Big political moves, though, will require more,” Mr. Levi continued. “They will require sustained and focused advocacy from the president. People will not make any intuitive link



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between the tragedy in the gulf and legislation that raises electricity prices. For most Americans, the [oil spill](#) is tragic, but jobs and the economy are still the clear number one. The oil spill can help focus people's attention, but it will take something else to close the deal."

The president's Friday announcement came against a backdrop of an administration scrambling to both respond to the crisis in the gulf and to appear to be responding to the crisis. There has been a daily drumbeat of press releases, conference calls, denunciations of BP and announcements of investigations and reorganizations intended to showcase the vigor of the government's action.

Yet even as the oil has continued to gush beneath the gulf, the administration has not been shy about acknowledging the reality that a third of domestically produced crude oil comes from offshore and that undersea reserves will continue to be an important source of American energy for decades. On March 31, Mr. Obama announced a significant expansion of offshore oil development, just three weeks before the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded, a policy shift long in the making and unfortunate in the timing.

Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#), charged with both leasing the Outer Continental Shelf for drilling and protecting it from the ravages of oil development, reminded Congress this week that the administration was pursuing what he called a "balanced" energy strategy for the future that included substantial and expanded offshore exploration.

"Offshore development is a necessary part of that future," Mr. Salazar told the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee this week. But he emphasized that new safety and environmental safeguards would have to be put in place before extensive new drilling was permitted.

Thus the president's options are both defined and limited. There will be more offshore drilling, but the rules of the game have now changed.

As Mr. Obama put in on March 31, "Given our energy needs, in order to sustain economic growth and produce jobs, and keep our businesses competitive, we are going to need to harness traditional sources of fuel even as we ramp up production of new sources of renewable homegrown energy."

A version of this news analysis appeared in print on May 22, 2010, on page A8 of the New York edition.

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