



July 29, 2021

Dear Senator,

I write to you on behalf of Western Leaders Network, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization of 450 local and tribal elected officials across the Interior West, to express support for federal initiatives to invest in climate solutions and the workforce, particularly jobs cleaning up and plugging leaks from orphan oil and gas facilities.

President Biden's [Build Back Better plan](#) includes the critical objective of putting the energy industry to work plugging and cleaning up orphan oil and gas wells that have been abandoned by companies across the nation. As stated in the plan, hundreds of thousands of these wells pose serious health and safety risks while also causing and worsening damage to our lands, air and water, all of which are precious commodities here in the Interior West. Many of these facilities are also located in rural, western communities with limited resources, few jobs and fossil fuel economies whose strength depends on volatile market forces.

The Build Back Better plan would invest \$16 billion in providing well-paying jobs to hundreds of thousands of people plugging oil and gas wells and consequently reduce climate-warming methane emissions. This would simultaneously help relieve oil and gas communities that struggle to employ its residents, prevent the waste of taxpayer resources and address our increasingly urgent climate crisis. Western Leaders Network urges you to support administrative and legislative efforts to reclaim orphan and abandoned oil and gas facilities and mitigate greenhouse gas pollution sources like methane, for several important reasons:

- **Federal investment in this effort would create tens of thousands of new jobs.** While estimates on the exact number of orphan wells vary depending on definition and state documentation, the [EPA estimates that there are 2.1 million](#) unplugged, abandoned oil and gas wells nationwide. According to one study, a federal effort to address [500,000 of these wells could provide up to 120,000 jobs](#), which is the economic stimulus communities like ours need now.
- **Oil and gas reclamation and leak detection jobs have upward mobility.** Oil and gas reclamation and methane mitigation is a burgeoning industry that provides job opportunities for both entry-level and highly skilled, experienced workers. [At least 60](#)

Western Leaders Network

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[companies provide methane leak detection and repair services to oil and gas companies in 45 states, and offer annual salaries of up to \\$113,110](#), and [this industry has nearly doubled in size since 2017](#).

- **Reducing emissions is a win-win-win for industry, taxpayers and the environment.** According to the EPA, the average unplugged abandoned well [emits 0.13 metric tons of methane](#) annually. That means if there are 2.1 million unplugged abandoned wells nationwide, they produce approximately 280,000 metric tons of methane each year, equivalent to 9.5 million tons of carbon dioxide. Other sources estimate the yearly average [is as much as 0.19 metric tons](#) of methane. Plugging orphan wells cuts down on this waste, which means oil and gas operators retain more product, more revenue can go to communities for public services and infrastructure projects, and we reduce the amount of climate-warming greenhouse gases, including methane, entering the atmosphere.
- **Plugging wells has a price tag, but so does climate change.** Upon taking office, President Biden reestablished the Interagency Working Group on the Social Cost of Greenhouse Gases, which monetizes the economic and environmental impact of pollutants like carbon dioxide and methane. Using 2020 as a baseline, the IWG [estimated the social cost of methane at \\$1,500 per metric ton and carbon at \\$51 per metric ton](#). Here in the Interior West, local leaders are confronted daily with the economic, health and environmental impacts of climate change, and our constituents are the ones who pay for it.
- **There is widespread support for plugging wells and clean energy investments.** A [coalition of oil and gas producing states](#) has expressed support for plugging orphan oil and gas wells, as have [leaders on both sides of the political aisle](#). More than two-thirds, or [70%, of voters are more likely to support President Biden's Build Back Better plan](#) if it includes provisions to prioritize oil and gas workers for new clean energy jobs with fair labor standards and unionizing opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed U.S. unemployment rates to near record highs, and the ever-worsening climate crisis demand swift and immediate action from federal leadership to boost the labour market, reinvest in legacy fossil fuel communities and help them achieve just transitions, and pave a path toward a clean energy future. Clean local energy economies are primed for exponential growth with the help of bold federal investments. Investing in efforts to clean up orphan oil and gas facilities will create the economic stimulus westerners need and directly benefit our economies, our environment and the short- and long-term health of our communities.

I urge your support of the Build Back Better plan and that you invest in climate solutions, jobs and justice, and look forward to opportunities to meet virtually with you and/or your staff over the August recess to discuss this critical legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gwen Lachelt". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gwen Lachelt
Executive Director