

28 January 2023

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Publication date: 12 August 2020

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ISSN: 0964-8496

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Joe Biden's pick of senator Kamala Harris as his running mate in November's US presidential election shores up the environmental credentials of the Democratic Party's policy platform, and introduces fresh doubts around whether a new administration in the White House would move to curb or outlaw fracking in the country.

The California senator, who presumptive Democrat presidential nominee Biden yesterday unveiled as his pick for the vice-presidential ticket, has a track record campaigning for climate and environmental justice issues and was one of the first senators to endorse the ambitious Green New Deal.

Harris served as California's attorney general from 2011-17, in which time she vigorously defended former president Barack Obama's Clean Power Plan and New Source Standards that sought to address greenhouse gas emissions from power plants.

She also sued oil and gas companies for alleged environmental infringements, and secured a USD 14 million settlement with BP in 2016 over alleged violations of state laws regarding underground fuel storage tank laws.

Harris assumed office as the junior US senator from California in 2017, and launched her own bid for the presidential nomination before stepping aside in December 2019.

On the campaign trail, Harris said in September there was "no question" she would ban fracking, starting with "what we can do on day one around public lands". She added: "We have to just acknowledge that

the residual impact of fracking is enormous in terms of the impact on the health and safety of communities.”

US president Donald Trump was quick to pounce on this when Biden unveiled his choice of running-mate. “She is against fracking; she is against petroleum products,” he told reporters yesterday. “She’s against fracking. Fracking is a big deal. I mean, how do you do that and go into Pennsylvania or Ohio or Oklahoma or the great state of Texas?” the president was quoted as saying.

However, Harris’ USD 10 trillion climate plan, released last year, stopped short of demanding an outright ban, proposing only to “immediately halt[] all new fossil fuel leases on federal lands and waters”. This is in line with Biden’s stated position on the matter.

Harris’ climate plan aimed to create a carbon-neutral economy by 2045, end fossil fuel subsidies, enforce corporate climate risk disclosures, and introduce a “progressively increasing fee” on carbon emissions. It also proposed for the US to rejoin the Paris climate accord.

Last week, Harris and New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez introduced the Climate Equity Act, legislation to “ensure that the United States government centers communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis in policy related to climate and the environment”.

‘Frontline communities’ are “those that have experienced systemic socioeconomic disparities, environmental racism, and other forms of injustice, including low-income communities, indigenous peoples, and communities of color”.

Announcing his choice on social media yesterday, Biden hailed Harris as “a fearless fighter for the little guy, and one of the country’s finest public servants”. Former president Barack Obama said Harris “spent her career defending our Constitution and fighting for folks who need a fair shake”.

Harris’ appointment was also welcomed by the Sunrise Movement, a youth branch of the Democratic party that campaigns against climate change and for green jobs and played a role in forging the Green New Deal.

The California senator made climate change “a top priority” and took the Sunrise Movement’s ‘No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge’ – under which signatories commit not to receive contributions greater than USD 200 from oil, gas and coal industry executives and lobbyists.

But American Energy Alliance president Thomas Pyle was quoted as saying: “Joe Biden has chosen a running mate who is even less connected to working-class Americans and whose energy platform is even more out of touch than his own.” - SK



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