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[Back to previous page](#)

## President Obama calls for one-third cut to oil imports

By Steven Mufson, Wednesday, March 30, 12:30 PM

[President Obama](#) on Wednesday called for a one-third cut in oil imports by 2020, part of a plan he says will reduce U.S. dependence on foreign petroleum.

With [rising gasoline prices](#) at home and political turmoil [throughout the Middle East](#), Obama sought in a speech at Georgetown University to rally Americans — and bickering lawmakers — behind a program that draws equally from energy savings and increases in energy production.

“We’ve been down this road before,” Obama said, acknowledging that past presidents have made similar calls for greater energy independence. But, he added, “we can’t rush to action when gas prices are high and then hit the snooze button when prices are low again.”

He said that rising demand from developing countries such as China mean that oil demand will continue to rise faster than supplies, and that whatever ups and downs in prices took place, “when you look at the long-term trends, there are going to be more ups than downs.”

Most facets of his plan are familiar. The president proposed wider use of natural gas, including incentives to use it to fuel fleet vehicles such as city buses. He backed greater production of biofuels and vowed to establish at least four commercial scale refineries producing cellulosic ethanol or advanced biofuels within the next two years. He also pledged to establish higher fuel efficiency standards for heavy trucks, just as he did for passenger vehicles early in his administration.

Obama also urged oil companies to make greater use of the federal leases both onshore and offshore to prop up domestic oil output. The oil industry and GOP lawmakers have been loudly complaining about delays in the permitting of offshore drilling in recent months. But an irked administration, which had pledged tougher scrutiny of drilling applications after last year’s massive [Gulf of Mexico oil spill](#), fired back Tuesday with [an Interior Department report](#) that revived earlier debates about whether oil companies were exploiting the leases they already have.

“We just spent all that time, energy and money trying to clean up a big mess,” Obama said. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t have amnesia. I remember these things. I think it’s important that we prevent something like that from happening again.”

Obama has made energy a priority since taking office, with the increase in automobile fuel efficiency marking perhaps his greatest impact. As part of the economic stimulus package adopted in 2009, he also won about



\$70 billion in grants and loan guarantees to promote energy efficiency, advanced batteries for cars and renewable energy. He has said that in addition to energy benefits those monies will create what he calls “green jobs.” But he poured a large amount of effort into winning passage of a cap-and-trade climate bill, which failed.

Obama faces a plethora of obstacles in the push for less reliance on foreign oil.

One is the appetite of the [U.S. economy](#). The federal Energy Information Administration forecasts that the United States will import a net of 9.7 million barrels a day of crude oil and refined petroleum products in 2011 and 10 million barrels a day in 2012. Net imports accounted for 49 percent of all U.S. liquid fuel consumption in 2010, down from 57 percent in 2009 primarily because of the drop in consumption during the recession.

Obama sought to make it easier to meet his pledge by citing as his baseline for cuts the amount of oil the United States was using when he took office. In his speech and in White House talking points, the 2008 import figure of 11 million barrels a day was cited.

Another obstacle is political. Members of Congress are divided about the best ways to cut imports, with lawmakers often uniting across party lines depending on what region they represent. An expansion of offshore drilling, for example, can garner substantial support among gulf coast lawmakers, but draw opposition from representatives from states such as California, Florida and New Jersey.

The Republican leadership also appears determined to use the energy issue to attack the president. Senate Minority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#) (R-Kty.) issued a statement accusing the administration of “waging a war on American energy” because of delays on permitting drilling on federal lands.

Meanwhile, environmental groups were dismayed at Obama’s talk about expanding U.S. oil production. The backdrop behind Obama during the speech displayed the phrase “winning the future.” But Friends of the Earth issued a statement saying Obama’s speech was “more about polluting the future than winning it.”

With Obama’s push for more electric cars, there is also disagreement about the best way to make sure electric utilities can meet demands. With [Japan’s nuclear crisis](#) still in progress, it is a sensitive time to promote nuclear energy. Obama said he wanted to make U.S. nuclear power more secure, but he said “but we can’t simply take it off the table.”

Obama can expect support from people worried about the national security implications of relying on oil imports. On Wednesday the Bipartisan Policy Center — featuring former senators Trent Lott and [Byron Dorgan](#) and former Obama national security adviser [Jim Jones](#) — is scheduled to release a report saying “recent events — from unprecedented unrest in the Middle East and North Africa to the Japanese nuclear crisis to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill — demand a thorough reassessment of America’s energy security.”

In addition to political obstacles, Obama faces technical ones. Legislation signed by President [George W. Bush](#) in 2007 called on oil refiners to use minimum amounts of biofuels, including 16 billion gallons a year of cellulosic ethanol by 2022. Though substantial amounts of venture capital — and government subsidies — have gone into pilot plants, commercial viability has remained elusive.

Finally, even if the United States becomes more efficient and uses less energy for every unit of economic output, a growing economy is one hungry for energy.

Virtually every president since President Richard Nixon has called upon Americans to conserve energy and seek alternatives to oil imports in the name of independence from international turmoil or pressure.

In 1973, Nixon called for a “Project Independence,” an effort he said should summon the spirit of the Apollo space missions or Manhattan Project and achieve self-sufficiency by 1980. Instead, the United States was

importing more oil by that time.

In January 1975, President Gerald Ford said that “Americans are no longer in full control of their own destiny, when that destiny depends on uncertain foreign fuel at high prices fixed by others.”

In 1977, President Jimmy Carter called the energy challenge “the moral equivalent of war” and proposed conservation, alternative energy, higher gasoline taxes, ethanol fuels and wider use of nuclear power. He too set a goal of reducing oil imports by a third, to 6 million barrels a day by 1985 from 9 million a day in 1977.

That target was surpassed by 1982, thanks to a rise in Alaskan oil production and the virtual end of the use of oil by electric utilities and manufacturers. But soon imports resumed their relentless climb as a share of U.S. oil needs. By 2006, Bush was calling on Americans to end their “addiction” to oil , warning of “danger and decline” if the country continued to rely on “unstable” countries. He urged a 75 percent reduction in U.S. oil imports by 2025.

“We’ve been having this conversation for nearly four decades now,” Obama said in a March 11 news conference. “Every few years, gas prices go up; politicians pull out the same old political playbook, and then nothing changes. And when prices go back down, we slip back into a trance. And then when prices go up, suddenly we’re shocked. I think the American people are tired of that.”

On Wednesday, Obama noted that Nixon’s call for energy independence was made before the Georgetown students listening were born. He said he did not want to leave the energy future unsolved for his children.

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