

Obama opens US coastlines for oil drilling

Hiram Lee
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In a speech before a military audience at Andrews Air Force Base on Wednesday, President Obama announced he was preparing to make large regions of the US coastline available for oil drilling for the first time. Oil corporations will now be allowed to explore and eventually drill along the Atlantic coastline, new regions in the Gulf of Mexico and off the northern coast of Alaska.

Coastal waters spanning from northern Delaware to central Florida, an area comprising 167 million acres of ocean, could now be leased to oil corporations for exploration and development. Approximately 130 million acres in the waters north of Alaska will also be made available. The Pacific coast will remain closed to oil and gas development, along with coastal waters from New Jersey north.

The oil and gas industries have had their sights on these regions for decades. The area in the eastern Gulf of Mexico to be opened up to corporations by the new Obama plan is of particular interest, with up to 3.5 million barrels of “economically recoverable oil” and 17 trillion cubic feet of gas believed to be waiting there. Both the amount of resources available and their close proximity to American markets are important incentives. Oil companies could stand to gain billions of dollars in profits from the newly accessible coastal areas.

These regions have been off-limits to oil corporations for decades. In 1981, Congress initiated the Outer Continental Shelf Moratorium, which prohibited the leasing of waters on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the United States as well as in Alaska’s Bristol Bay. In 1990, President George H. W. Bush also issued a ban on Outer Continental Shelf drilling with an executive order that was later renewed by President Clinton.

In 2008, President George W. Bush lifted the presidential ban issued by his father, and the

Democratic-controlled Congress allowed its own moratorium to expire. While the Bush administration was unable to finish the work of opening up coastal waters for the oil corporations, the Obama administration has now stepped in to finish the job of removing any further restrictions.

In his remarks at Andrews Air Force Base on Wednesday, Obama informed his audience, “We’re announcing the expansion of offshore oil and gas exploration but in ways that balance the need to harness domestic energy resources and the need to protect America’s natural resources.”

Turning reality on its head, Obama attempted to paint the opening of millions of acres to energy conglomerates as a major step on the way to “clean energy.” He admitted, “There will be those who strongly disagree with this decision, including those who say we should not open any new areas to drilling.”

He presented this cave-in to the oil companies as though it was a “middle of the road” compromise. “[W]e need to move beyond the tired debates of the left and the right, between business leaders and environmentalists, between those who would claim drilling is a cure-all and those who would claim it has no place,” he said.

This marks a complete reversal from the position held by Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign when the Republican Party was using soaring gas prices as a pretext to clear the way for offshore drilling. In a 2008 press conference held in Florida, then-candidate Obama rejected calls to open new areas of the coastline to drilling, saying, “It would have long-term consequences for our coastlines but no short-term benefits, since it would take at least 10 years to get any oil.”

Obama added then, “Offshore drilling would not lower gas prices today, it would not lower gas prices tomorrow, it would not lower gas prices this year, it

would not lower gas prices five years from now.”

“When I’m president,” Obama said, “I intend to keep in place the moratorium here in Florida and around the country that prevents oil companies from drilling off Florida’s coasts.”

Aiding Obama in implementing his new plan has been Interior Secretary Ken Salazar. A former senator from Colorado, Salazar has maintained close ties to mining and ranching industries for years, and during his time in the Senate was a right-wing ally of energy corporations. His voting record shows that he was a supporter of offshore drilling near the coast of Florida, that he came out against repealing tax breaks for Exxon-Mobile and against increasing fuel efficiency standards for US automobiles.

Among those groups now protesting the Obama-Salazar plan for offshore drilling is the Sierra Club, whose executive director, Michael Brune, released a statement reading, “Drilling our coasts will do nothing to lower gas prices or create energy independence. It will only jeopardize beaches, marine life, and coastal tourist economies, all so the oil industry can make a short-term profit.”

The offshore drilling plan proposed by Obama is in line with all other pro-corporate policies of his administration. It is a gift to the oil corporations and yet another concession made to the Republican Party. The offshore drilling plan comes as the Obama administration is renewing its push for the passage in the Senate of a comprehensive climate bill that it claims will reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

As Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said earlier this month, "If you're a Republican, and you believe we should 'drill, baby, drill,' now's your chance.”



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