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Critics of offshore drilling pack Calif. hearing

By Jason Dearen
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Environmentalists dressed as polar bears, sea turtles and jellyfish were among dozens of people who packed a public hearing Thursday to press Interior Secretary Ken Salazar not to open new areas of the West Coast to oil drilling.



Miyo Sakashita, right, of Oakland, Calif., holds her nine-month-old son, Kai Savage, during a demonstration outside a public hearing on offshore oil drilling, in San Francisco, Thursday, April 16, 2009. Environmentalists, lawmakers and others packed the forum, the last of four such meetings around the country with U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

The public forum, the last of four such meetings around the country with Salazar, also drew state and federal lawmakers concerned about the effects any expansion of offshore drilling could have on the region's economy and natural beauty.

"Our state is saying clearly to you today, no," Sen. Barbara Boxer told Salazar at the opening of the hearing at the UC San Francisco Mission Bay campus. The California Democrat said the state's

coastline is a huge economic asset "just as it is."

President Barack Obama has said his focus is on the need to develop renewable energy sources — biomass, solar and wind energy and research into electric-hybrid transportation — and to shift away from oil dependence, but a sweeping ban on drilling across much of the country's coastal waters was scrapped last October.

So far, Salazar has been cautious when discussing offshore drilling, and has called for more study and public input before final decisions are made.



U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar delivers opening remarks during a public hearing on the contentious issue of oil drilling off the coast of California, in San Francisco, Thursday, April 16, 2009. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

At a news conference outside the hearing, he said he hoped to be able to release details of the Obama administration's energy plan — which would set forth details about offshore and onshore development — sometime this year. He would not be more specific.

"My high expectations are that this will happen in 2009, and that we'll have a map and a way forward," Salazar said.

Supporters of ramping up offshore oil

drilling say it would provide state, federal and local governments with revenue in a down economy and help the country lessen its dependence on foreign oil.



A person sits dressed as a polar bear during a public hearing on the contentious issue of oil drilling off the coast of California, in San Francisco, Thursday, April 16, 2009. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

"Right now we import 60 to 65 percent of our oil from a foreign country," said Joe Sparano, president of the Western States Petroleum Industry, to hisses from the audience. "There are 10 billion barrels of oil off the shore of California. That would allow us to replace California's foreign imports for 35 years."

There are 1.7 billion acres offshore that could be opened to drilling for oil and natural gas under a current proposal, according to a report by the Interior Department's Minerals Management Service.

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