

US Interior Secretary breaks with 'drill-only' energy policy

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WASHINGTON (AFP) — US Interior Secretary Ken Salazar on Tuesday moved away from "drill-only" energy policies as he blocked a last-minute attempt by the administration of George W. Bush to push through the sale of offshore leases to gas and oil companies.

"On January 16, the last business day of the Bush administration, the administration proposed a new five-year plan for offshore oil and gas leasing," Salazar told a news conference.

What Salazar called a "midnight action" by the previous administration favored big oil while ignoring developers of renewable energy.

It would have moved forward from 2012 to 2010 the creation of a new energy development plan that would affect some 300 million offshore acres on the outer continental shelf (OCS), from the US eastern seaboard to the Pacific Ocean off California, the eastern Gulf of Mexico and Alaska.

Salazar also decried the previous administration's decision to give the public just six weeks to comment on the proposal.

"It was a process rigged to force hurried decisions based on bad information ... a process tilted toward the usual energy players while renewable energy companies and the interests of American consumers and taxpayers were being overlooked," Salazar said.

"We need to set aside the Bush administration's midnight timetable for the plan," he said, ordering a six-month extension for the public hearings, putting the deadline back from March to September.

The administration of President Barack Obama, who has pledged to make government transparent and inclusive, would hold meetings in the four regions affected by the offshore lease proposal, Salazar said.

And the new interior secretary has commissioned a report from the US Geological Survey and the Minerals Management Survey (MMS) which would "assemble all the information we have about offshore resources, conventional and renewable."

Salazar's promises to change the way the United States forges its energy policies followed on from action he took last week to block the sale of exploration contracts to gas companies on wilderness land in Utah.

It also underscored the desire of the Obama administration to move toward an energy policy not



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US Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar



focused solely on fossil fuels.

"For the last eight years, America has taken one road to energy independence, which was drill, drill, drill," said Salazar.

"I intend to do what the prior administration failed to do and that is to build a framework for offshore renewable energy development so that we can incorporate the great potential for wind, wave and ocean current energy into our offshore energy strategy," Salazar said.

Matt Vespa, senior attorney for environmental group the Center for Biological Diversity, hailed the announcement.

"It's important that we transition from fossil fuels to renewables and the focus on looking at the OCS in terms of renewable resources is very positive," Vespa told AFP.

"It was really absurd to open up all these areas without any public process as Bush had proposed doing before he left office," he said.

Under Obama, the United States would move from a drill-baby-drill energy approach to a comprehensive plan that does not torpedo renewable energy sources.

"As President Obama has said, we need to be honest about our energy future," said Salazar.

"A drill-only approach, onshore and offshore, is not enough. We need a comprehensive energy plan that takes us to a new energy frontier that America so desires, and we need to secure the energy independence of the United States with a broad portfolio of energy supplies," he said.

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