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Environmentalists criticize White House climate tactics after drilling roll-out

By Ben Geman

President Barack Obama's offshore drilling expansion is prompting criticism from environmentalists who fear the White House has agreed to major concessions without gaining new support for climate change legislation.

Obama backs increased drilling and nuclear power development – he proposed a \$36 billion increase in nuclear plant loan guarantees in February – while emphasizing that they should be part of a larger energy strategy that includes limits on greenhouse gas emissions.

But activists are questioning whether Obama is giving up bargaining chips too early, and risking the support of coastal Democrats such as Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) in the process. Several Republicans, meanwhile, called the drilling plan too narrow.

"Politically, he has received no additional votes by doing this and he appears to be at risk of losing votes he should have," said Bill Snape, senior counsel to the Center for Biological Diversity.

Similar concerns have emerged on Capitol Hill. "It does seem like we're giving away something and it's not clear what we got in return," said a Senate Democratic aide.

Democrats hope to bring broad climate change and energy legislation to the floor later this year. Sens. John Kerry (D-Mass.), Lindsey Graham

(R-S.C.) and Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) are crafting a bill that would blend emissions limits with increased domestic energy production.

Obama's plan to allow oil exploration off the Atlantic Coast and expanded Arctic exploration does not require Capitol Hill approval. However, plans to substantially expand drilling in the eastern Gulf of Mexico would require Congress to shrink the no-drilling buffer off Florida's western shore.

Also, coastal senators who support drilling want Congress to pass measures giving their states a nice share of leasing and royalty revenue, akin to the deal that Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Alabama won in a 2006 law.

Sierra Club Chairman Carl Pope called the drilling plan a political misstep in a blog post Thursday, claiming it will cost votes on a climate bill.

"It's bad vote counting. While I have conceded that the nuclear loan guarantees, although bad policy, are probably decent politics in Congress, offshore drilling is not," Pope writes.

"President Obama has already riled the New Jersey and Maryland delegations, which were previously safe votes," he continues. "And now the thorny issue of who gets the money -- the coastal states or the Federal Treasury -- will roil the Senate vote count further. The oil industry has attacked the President for not offering even more areas -- and no new Republican votes for climate

legislation popped out of the Capitol Hill woodwork."

Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), an opponent of offshore drilling, also expressed concern. "If issues like coastline drilling are being promoted to gain Republican votes and support from oil companies, then we need to know exactly how much support it will actually deliver," he said in a statement. "This can't be a case of giving up something for nothing."

But the drilling announcement could help keep or put some GOP and centrist Democratic votes in play.

Sen. Jim Webb (D-Va.) praised the plan, although he also wants revenue-sharing for his state. Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) – another fence-sitter in climate change debates – also applauded it.

And Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) told the Washington Post that Obama's moves on drilling and nuclear power are "genuinely trying to approach the energy production issue in a multifaceted way and a realistic way, rather than listening to people on their left."

Another swing Republican, Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), had a measured response to the plan. She praised the decision to allow oil exploration to proceed on existing leases off Alaska's northern coast.

"I will work with the administration on proceeding with important future lease sales off Alaska's coast, as well as along the Atlantic coast and the

Eastern Gulf of Mexico,” she said in a prepared statement Wednesday.

Another Senate Democratic aide said environmentalists’ concerns about giving something for nothing are overblown, noting, “I don’t think it was necessary to hold [drilling] as a chip to play in the negotiations on climate change.”

The aide believes Obama’s plan could be seen as an act of good faith by Republicans, and that it still leaves space for Kerry, Graham and Lieberman to address coastal development.

But Snape argues the strategy is the wrong way to go. “It is astonishing that we are giving away things before

a bill is even introduced, not to mention anywhere close to the Senate floor,” Snape said.

Obama’s drilling plan announced Wednesday includes eventual oil-and-gas leasing off the coast of mid-Atlantic and southeastern states – areas that until 2008 were covered by drilling bans.

In addition, it envisions expanded Arctic oil exploration off the northern coast of Alaska in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas (although it cancels several upcoming lease sales there to allow further study).

However, the plan places Alaska’s sensitive Bristol Bay region off-limits

and does not call for leasing off the Pacific Coast.

The White House, for its part, dismisses the idea that Obama’s drilling move is a negotiating tactic on climate at all.

“The president’s policy wasn’t a matter of horse trading over what he thought he could get out of this or that,” White House spokesman Bill Burton said Thursday. “It was driven by what he thought was the right policy for a comprehensive energy policy that puts our country on the right path towards more renewable energy, less dependence on foreign oil, and creating jobs of the future in the 21st century.”