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Obama clears way for more oil and gas drilling off U.S. coasts

By JENNIFER A. DLOUHY

WASHINGTON - President Barack Obama today unveiled a plan to expand oil

and natural gas drilling in untouched coastal waters and parts of the eastern Gulf of Mexico, saying the move was essential to wean the United States off foreign energy sources.

Obama announced the drilling blueprint as part of a broader suite of energy and environmental initiatives, including new fuel economy standards, the federal government's purchase of a new fleet of more than 5,000 hybrid vehicles and a plan for boosting biofuels.

"We are going to need to harness traditional sources of fuel even as we ramp up production of new sources of renewable, homegrown energy," Obama said during a speech at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. Expanding offshore oil and gas exploration, he said, "is part of a broader strategy that will move us from an economy that runs on fossil fuels and foreign oil to one that relies on more homegrown fuels and clean energy."

Obama's drilling outline, which would govern offshore exploration through 2017, includes the lease sale of a tract of Atlantic waters 50 miles off the Virginia coast and plans for new seismic studies along south- and mid-Atlantic states that could help pinpoint pockets of oil and gas. That research would guide future drilling decisions on the Atlantic seaboard.

At the same time, the administration walled off new drilling for the North Atlantic as well as Pacific waters along California, Oregon and Washington. The president also is planning to keep drilling out of Alaska's Bristol Bay, home of a large sockeye salmon fishery and the migratory routes of endangered whales.

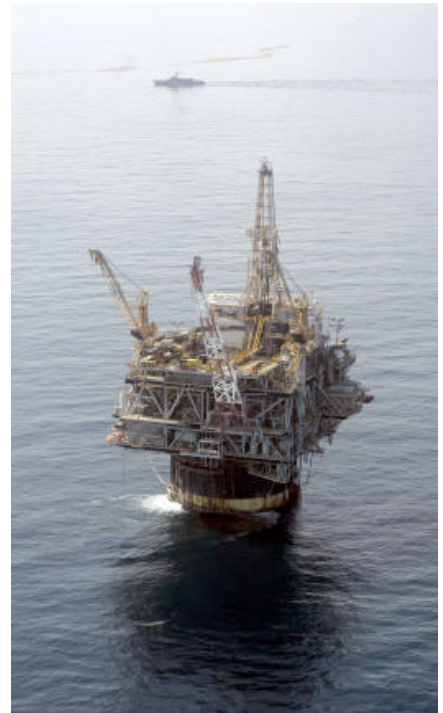
Under the Interior Department's revised drilling plan for 2007 through 2012, four pending lease sales in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas north of Alaska would be canceled, and future drilling decisions about the region would come only after additional scientific studies and environmental research.

The long-awaited plan represents an attempt to bridge the deep divide separating environmentalists that make up the president's political base and drilling advocates in Congress and the energy industry.

It also is designed to spur Senate negotiations on a climate change bill that have focused on combining caps on greenhouse gas emissions with protections for coal-fired power plants, expanded offshore drilling and boosted nuclear power.

It was delivered as America heads into the summer driving season and amid polling that shows most people support new drilling in the outer continental shelf.

But Obama's offshore drilling proposal was alienating forces on all sides of the issue today, with environmentalists blasting the plan as a threat to pristine coastlines and



The Chevron Genesis Oil Rig Platform is seen in the Gulf of Mexico near New Orleans.

- Mary Altaffer AP

Republicans saying it was nothing more than lip service from an administration that has slow-walked conventional oil and gas exploration.

The drilling outline represents a scale-back of former President George W. Bush's proposal to open broad swaths of the Pacific and Atlantic coasts for new energy leases.

Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Wash., said the administration was "attempting to pull the wool over our eyes" with a plan that "closes off more areas than it opens."

"President Obama's rhetoric conveys support for increasing American oil and natural gas production, while

the reality is he's proposing a plan that will close more areas to drilling than it opens, and the few areas still available won't be open for years," Hastings said.

The head of the Sierra Club denounced the plan as a giveaway to Big Oil.

"The oil industry already has access to drilling on millions of acres of America's public lands and water," said Michael Brune, the environmental group's executive director. "We don't need to hand over

our last protected pristine coastal areas just so oil companies can break more profit records."

Brendan Cummings, the senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity, said it appears Obama is adopting "flawed and outdated Bush policies as his own," because the administration left the door open to eventual exploration in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas.

The Interior Department was forced to retool the current schedule of offshore

leases governing 2007 through 2012 after a federal appeals court last April ruled that the Bush administration had not done a sufficient environmental review of expanded drilling in that area off the Alaskan coast.

With its announcement today, the administration effectively scrapped a Bush-era plan that would have OK'd leases on Pacific and Atlantic waters where no drilling has been allowed for decades. The new proposal covers drilling leases from July 1, 2012 until 2017.