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Activists: Obama drill plan is betrayal

‘Clean energy’ talk not convincing; natural gas a bridge?

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President Barack Obama on Wednesday wrapped himself in green themes and even imagery — including a fighter jet that uses a plant-based fuel — but that wasn’t enough to convince any environmental groups that his plans for offshore drilling were a fair compromise on the path to a clean energy future.

While Republicans criticized the proposed new leases in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic as limited, environmental activists were as vigorously opposed — but for reasons having to do with oil spills and carbon emissions tied to climate change.

For many activists, the sense was one of betrayal.

“Today’s announcement is unfortunately all too typical of what we have seen so far from President Obama — promises of change, a year of ‘deliberation,’ and ultimately, adoption of flawed and outdated Bush policies as his own,” said Brendan Cummings, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity, which has made a name for itself by filing endangered species lawsuits.

“Drilling our coasts will do nothing to lower gas prices or create energy independence,” added Michael Brune, who recently took over as director of the Sierra Club. “It will only jeopardize beaches, marine life, and coastal tourist economies, all so the oil industry can make a short-term profit.”

Instead, environmental groups said, greater effort should be placed on renewable energy, improving vehicle mileage and making other energy uses, from refrigerators to home heaters, more energy efficient.

‘Clean energy’ pitch

For more than 20 years, drilling was banned in most offshore areas, except for the Gulf of Mexico, because of concerns that spills could harm the environment.

The administration has been weighing the pros and cons of offshore drilling since it took office and put the brakes on a Bush-era proposal that called for drilling along the U.S. East Coast and off the coast of California.

The president’s speech at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland was designed to get Republican support for the energy and climate bill languishing in the Senate. But while the oil industry voiced

support, Republicans generally rejected the plans.

The Environmental Defense Fund, which has worked with industry on projects to reduce pollution, said it understood that Obama needed to reach out to Republicans “after hearing from key senators that it’s a necessary step to succeed in passing climate and energy legislation in the Senate.”

But Steve Cochran, the group’s climate director, added that “now it’s time for the supporters of new drilling and an ‘all-of-the-above’ approach to energy policy to step forward and support comprehensive legislation, including a limit on carbon pollution. And the president must provide the leadership and drive to make that happen.”

Obama and top aides on Wednesday emphasized a “clean energy” strategy that continues to use oil and coal while also developing less polluting and less carbon-intensive energy sources like solar, wind and natural gas.

“The president knows we cannot drill our way to energy independence,” Carol Browner, Obama’s czar for energy and climate issues, told reporters.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar,

whose agency manages those offshore areas, said the strategy represents “a new direction that will balance both development as well as conservation.”

Bigger future for gas?

Natural gas, which contains much less carbon than petroleum and coal, could become part of that balance. Already used to fuel most modern power plants, natural gas could even become a major vehicle energy source, since plug-in hybrids and all-electric vehicles have to draw their electricity from power plants.

Indeed, the federal government estimates that:

- Gulf of Mexico waters contain 161 trillion to 207 trillion

cubic feet of undiscovered, economically recoverable natural gas resources, and 36 billion to 41.5 billion barrels of undiscovered, economically recoverable oil.

- Atlantic coast waters hold 37 trillion cubic feet of gas and nearly 4 billion barrels of oil.
- Pacific Coast waters hold 18 trillion cubic feet of gas and 10.5 billion barrels of oil.

To put that in context, the United States imports about 2 billion barrels of oil a year from OPEC nations and is expected to import 2.7 trillion cubic feet of natural gas from all sources this year, according to the Energy Department.

Obama did not dwell on those numbers in his speech Thursday. But he did tout research into “homegrown fuels” like the mix used for the F/A-18 Super Hornet being tested by the Navy. Its biofuel blend uses the camelina sativa plant — a domestic, renewable, non-food source.

“This Navy fighter jet — called the Green Hornet — will be flown for the first time in just a few weeks, on Earth Day,” he said beaming. “If tests go as planned, it will be the first plane ever to fly faster than the speed of sound on a fuel mix that’s half biomass.”

msnbc.com’s Miguel Llanos as well as The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report.