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# Environmentalists upset at Obama offshore drilling plan

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WASHINGTON — Environmentalists gave a thumbs-down Wednesday to President Barack Obama's plan to expand oil drilling off US coasts.

Obama's plan would open tracts of the Atlantic off the coast of Virginia to exploration and expand leases for prospecting off the western coast of Florida.

It would also authorize scientific research off Alaska in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas, but bar exploration in Bristol Bay in the eastern Bering Sea, a habitat for sockeye salmon and other wildlife.

Drilling the Arctic "threatens marine life like whales and polar bears" due to "the constant danger of oil spills," and coastal drilling will "jeopardize beaches, marine life, and coastal tourist economies" -- but neither will bring down the price of oil or lead to energy independence, said Sierra Club executive director Michael Brune.

"What we need is bold, decisive steps towards clean energy, like the new clean cars regulations announced this week -- not more dirty, expensive offshore drilling," said Brune.

"The oil industry already has access to drilling on millions of acres of America's public lands and water. We don't need to hand over our last protected pristine coastal areas just so oil companies can break more profit records," he said.

Brendan Cummings, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity, described the announcement as "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so far from President Obama -- promises of change, a year of 'deliberation,' and ultimately, adoption of flawed and outdated Bush policies as his own," referring to former president George W. Bush.

The plan "will further our national addiction to oil and contribute to global warming, while at the same time directly despoiling the habitat of polar bears, endangered whales, and other imperiled wildlife."

The president said the decision was part of a comprehensive energy plan, designed to wean the United States off foreign energy sources from volatile areas and develop a new green economy.

Edward Markey, the Democrat head of the House of Representatives panel on Energy Independence and Global Warming, said he will re-introduce legislation that would impose an escalating fee on oil drilling rights not being used by oil companies.

Oil companies already hold the offshore drilling rights "to an area the size of Pennsylvania on which they aren't actually drilling," said Markey.

"Before oil companies drill off thousands of miles of pristine coastline, they should first use the thousands of drilling leases they already own," said Markey.

At least one oil industry expert, billionaire T Boone Pickens, said he didn't believe there was oil off the coast of Virginia.

Pickens told CNN that he has "no problem" with drilling offshore, but would rather see a move towards natural gas and renewable energy so the United States can reduce its dependency on imported oil.

"Natural gas is the way to go," said Pickens.

He believes the country could slash daily oil imports by 2.5 billion barrels if eight million, heavy-duty 18-wheel trucks convert to natural gas.

Natural gas is "cleaner. It's cheaper. It's abundant, and it's ours. Why not use it?" he asked.

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