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## Plan for Alaska waters gets mixed reviews

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The Associated Press

Alaska's Bristol Bay salmon will get a reprieve from offshore petroleum drilling under a new federal plan. But for polar bears and whales to the north, the effects of industrial development may be only delayed. On Wednesday, President Barack Obama announced a new policy that expands offshore drilling in the southern Atlantic coastline, the eastern Gulf of Mexico and makes significant changes in Alaska, where lease sales in four areas have been planned.

Bristol Bay, just north of the Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutian Islands, was removed from the current five-year leasing schedule and was not added to the new one that begins in 2012.

The Chukchi and Beaufort seas, home to America's two populations of polar bears, were removed from the current schedule but remain part of potential lease sales in 2012.

The administration also did not revoke leases previously sold in the Chukchi and Beaufort. A 2008 sale in the Chukchi earned the federal government \$2.7 billion. Shell Oil hopes to drill three exploration wells there this summer.

Environmental groups have long argued that the United States lacks basic information about wildlife

or even currents and navigation hazards to green-light industrial development in Arctic waters, which begin north of the Bering Strait off Alaska's northwest coast and continue to the Beaufort Sea on the state's north coast.

Brendan Cummings of the Center for Biological Diversity, the group that successfully petitioned to list polar bears as a threatened species, said the new national offshore oil-drilling plan would expand leasing throughout U.S. ocean waters far beyond what was authorized by the Bush administration and would be a death warrant for polar bears.

"Short of sending Sarah Palin back to Alaska to personally club polar bear cubs to death, the Obama administration could not have come up with a more efficient extinction plan for the polar bear," Cummings said.

The decision to remove Bristol Bay in southwest Alaska was applauded. Marilyn Heiman, director of the Pew Environment Group's U.S. Arctic program, called Bristol Bay one of the planet's richest marine ecosystems. Bristol Bay and other part of the Bering Sea provide 40 percent of America's seafood. Bristol Bay had been scheduled for a lease sale in 2011.

"With fish stocks declining around the globe, we cannot afford to put

Bristol Bay's vibrant fisheries at risk," she said.

Alaska's U.S. senators issued a joint press release. Republican Lisa Murkowski said she appreciated the Interior Department decision to allow valid existing rights to explore Alaska's huge offshore oil and gas reserves to go ahead. She urged federal regulators to OK Shell's plans.

"It's now critical that the EPA finalize long-pending air-quality permits for this summer's exploratory activity in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas," Murkowski said.

Democrat Mark Begich said Alaska's energy companies should be pleased with the green light from the Obama administration to proceed toward oil and gas development.

He said the U.S. Geological Survey estimates Alaska's coastal waters hold an estimated 132 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and nearly 27 billion barrels of oil.

Palin, the former Republican vice presidential candidate and Alaska governor, tweeted to her followers Tuesday following Obama's announcement: "Drill, baby, drill."