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Barack Obama reverses campaign promise and approves offshore drilling

President allows oil and gas exploration off several coastal areas to horsetrade with Republicans over climate change bills

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Barack Obama took the Republican slogan “drill, baby, drill” as his own today, opening up over 500,000 square miles of US coastal waters to oil and gas exploitation for the first time in over 20 years.

The move, a reversal of Obama’s early campaign promise to retain a ban on offshore exploration, appeared aimed at winning support from Republicans in Congress for new laws to tackle global warming. Sarah Palin’s “Drill, baby, drill” slogan was a prominent battle cry in the 2008 elections.

The areas opened up are off the Atlantic coast, the northern coast of Alaska and in the eastern Gulf of Mexico. However, in a concession to his environmentalist base, Obama did retain protection for Alaska’s Bristol Bay, the single largest source of seafood in America and home to endangered species of whale. The Pacific Coast from Mexico to Canada is also off-limits.

Obama said the decision to allow oil rigs off the Atlantic coast was a painful one, but that it would help reduce US dependence on imported oil.

“This is not a decision that I’ve made lightly,” the president said. “But the bottom line is this: given our energy needs, in order to sustain economic



Barack Obama announces offshore drilling plans at a naval base in MD
Photograph: Alex Wong/Getty Images

growth, produce jobs, and keep our businesses competitive, we’re going to need to harness traditional sources of fuel even as we ramp up production of new sources of renewable, homegrown energy.”

He said the administration would take steps to protect the environment and areas important to tourism off the Atlantic, as well as sensitive areas in the Arctic, and added: “Drilling alone cannot come close to meeting our long-term energy needs, and for the sake of the planet and our energy independence, we need to begin the transition to cleaner fuels now.”

Interior department officials said the areas opened up today are thought to contain the equivalent of three years’

annual US usage of recoverable oil and two years’ worth of natural gas.

Under the proposals, a vast swath of Atlantic coast from northern Delaware to central Florida, including about 167m acres of ocean, would be open to drilling. An additional 130m acres of ocean in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas north of Alaska could also open up for drilling following environmental assessment studies. About two-thirds of the eastern Gulf of Mexico would be open for exploration though the plan would bar rigs within 125 miles of the Florida coast.

The state of Virginia could see drilling within 50 miles of the coast, and could issue its first licences as early as next year. However, actual drilling

would probably not get underway for years. Drilling would be off-limits throughout the US Pacific coast. Bristol Bay in south-western Alaska would also be off the table until 2017.

Today's speech was widely seen as an attempt by Obama to use last week's epic victory on health reform as a springboard for other items on his agenda. He combined the announcement with a renewed appeal to Democrats and Republicans in Congress to pass climate change legislation. The laws would be a huge step forward towards a global deal but has encountered fierce domestic opposition.

A small group of Democrats and Republicans are expected to produce proposals to cut the US's mammoth greenhouse gas emissions, in the coming weeks. But the proposals are unlikely to go as far as environmentalists would like.

The interior secretary, Ken Salazar, made a significant declaration today, saying the administration had renounced the concept of carbon cap and trade. This system, seen by many as efficient and effective, sets a gradually reducing limit to emissions and then allows polluters to buy and sell permits to emit greenhouse gases, but opponents argue it would damage the economy. "The term cap and trade is not in the lexicon anymore," Salazar told CNBC television.

The go-ahead for drilling is also a bitter disappointment for environmentalists

and Democrats. That could make it even more difficult to stitch together a compromise proposal on climate change in the Senate. Last week, 10 Senators from coastal states, including those now opened up for drilling, issued a letter expressing concern that offshore exploration would hurt fishing and tourism industries.

Maryland's Democratic Senator Ben Cardin, a supporter of Obama's climate agenda, said: "We know spills happen with offshore drilling. It happens even with the most responsible drilling." Greenpeace saw the announcement as a betrayal of Obama's campaign promise, with director Phil Radford saying: "This act furthers America's addiction to oil." Oceana called it a "wholesale assault" on the seas.

Brendan Cummings, senior counsel at the Centre for Biological Diversity, said: "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."

The disappointment could lift on Thursday, as Obama said his administration would then finalise more rigorous fuel economy standards for cars and trucks. The White House will also buy 5,000 new hybrid vehicles for the federal fleet.

Today's drilling decision further consolidates Obama's position

in the middle ground between industry and environmentalists. Environmentalists have been disappointed with the president's decisions to restrict – but not ban outright – the highly destructive practice of blowing up mountaintops to mine thin seams of coal.

Obama indicated in his state of the union address that he was ready to offer two key concessions to Republicans – lifting the ban on offshore drilling and supporting new nuclear power plants – to try to gain support for climate change and energy legislation in Congress.

He took the first step last month, spurring the first construction of new nuclear plants since the Three Mile Island leak 30 years ago, by announcing \$18bn in loan guarantees for two new nuclear reactors.

As a presidential candidate, Obama had repeatedly attacked his opponent, John McCain, for suggesting drilling would lower gas prices, arguing that it would take several years and billions in investment before those areas became productive. But as the summer of 2008 wore on with prices spiking at the pump, Obama along with other Democrats began moderating their opposition to offshore drilling.

Democrats in Congress did not renew an annual ban on offshore drilling, and Obama began reversing his opposition.