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## Obama plan expands offshore oil drilling

By STEPHEN COLLINSON

President Barack Obama on Wednesday announced a plan to expand oil drilling off US coasts, drawing protests from green groups but charges by Republicans it did not go far enough.

The decision was a reversal of Obama's early 2008 campaign strategy, when he argued that lifting curbs on offshore drilling would take years to have an impact and would not provide enough sufficient extra supplies to be justified.

The president's plan, part of a comprehensive energy strategy, would see new tracts of the Atlantic off the Virginia coast opened to exploration, and expand leases for prospecting in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Florida.

Scientific research off Alaska in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas will also be authorized, but four pending lease sales in those waters that were approved under a plan of the former administration of president George W. Bush will be cancelled.

Exploration will be barred in Bristol Bay in the eastern Bering Sea, a crucial habitat for sockeye salmon and other wildlife.

"In the short term, as we transition to cleaner energy sources, we'll have to make tough decisions about opening new offshore areas for oil and gas development in ways that protect communities and coastlines," Obama said.

Obama portrayed the decision as 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.

"The bottom line is this: given our energy needs, in order to sustain economic growth, produce jobs, and keep our businesses competitive, were going to need to harness traditional sources of fuel even as we ramp up production of new sources of renewable, homegrown energy."

The announcement comes at a time when Democratic plans to pass "cap and trade" legislation to cut greenhouse gas emissions face uncertainty in Congress as the economic crisis lingers in a mid-term election year.

Republicans, who have marched in lock step to oppose almost all of Obama's domestic agenda, back wider exploration of untapped US reserves, and adopted a "Drill, baby, drill," mantra during the 2008 presidential campaign.

But party leaders argued Wednesday that Obama's plan was too limited in scope, while some energy industry advocates complained the administration was not lifting a ban on oil prospecting off the northeast and Pacific coasts.

"Today's announcement is a step in the right direction, but a small one that leaves enormous amounts of American energy off limits," said Senate Republican minority leader Mitch McConnell.

Environmentalists also criticized Obama's plan, some warning that the prospect of future drilling in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas could threaten prime polar bear habitats.

"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.

"Rather than bring about the change we need, this 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."

Greenpeace executive director Phil Radford also criticized the plan.

"Expanding offshore drilling in areas that have been protected for decades threatens our oceans and the coastal communities that depend on them with devastating oil spills, more pollution and climate change," he said.

The energy industry applauded the decision.

"If the proposed areas ultimately end up being leased, it will represent the most significant increase in access to domestic energy from our oceans in decades," said Randall Luthi of the National Ocean Industries Association (NOIA).

Obama initially opposed Republican calls in 2008 to lift the moratorium on more offshore drilling, but later adjusted tack amid rising gasoline prices, and said he would favor such a step as part of a comprehensive energy strategy.

"People who were watching this election knew that if you pulled the lever for Barack Obama in November of 2008... he was going to take a comprehensive view and not just take the short view that drilling was the answer to all of our answers," said White House deputy spokesman Bill Burton.