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Environmentalists Call For No New Offshore Drilling, Period



by Alejandro Davila Fragoso
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When the Obama administration scrapped leasing plans for drilling off the southeast Atlantic coast earlier this month, environmentalists praised the move, saying it was a win for the environment and the fight against climate change. But now some environmentalists and indigenous organizations from coastal regions say that's not enough, and they're calling on President Obama to use his executive power to end all new fossil fuel extraction in federal waters.

In a petition filed Tuesday, more than 45 groups led by the Center for Biological Diversity say that ending offshore drilling in the Outer Continental Shelf is an important step to limit global warming, as agreed to by countries in Paris last year.

"We saw the president react to the opposition to offshore drilling in the Atlantic and think that our public policy should be set forth by ... the public demanding further action to address climate change," Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director at the Center for Biological Diversity, told ThinkProgress.

While two weeks ago the Interior Department's five-year plan for ocean energy development took portions of the Atlantic off the table, other regions including the Arctic and the Gulf of Mexico remain open for bidding. The Outer Continental Shelf is an area of ocean and seabed that surrounds the country between three miles from the coast and the 200-mile limit of federal jurisdiction. It contains more than half of all unleased federal oil and gas. The newest plan evaluates 13 potential lease sales in six planning areas: 10 potential sales in the Gulf of Mexico, and three potential sales off the coast of Alaska.

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"Those offshore leases that were proposed are taking us in the wrong direction," Sakashita said, "and we are trying to show the president that there is a path for taking executive action that could seriously tackle our climate crisis." Groups say executive action is needed to address the threats to climate, health, safety, and biodiversity that the extraction and use of fossil fuel create.

In their petition, groups say there is only a finite amount of CO₂ that can be released into the atmosphere before limiting global warming becomes impossible. By allowing the extraction of oil and gas in these areas, the United States would consume as much as 70 percent of the global budget, environmentalists say. They argue that staying within a carbon budget compatible with the optimum 1.5°C target requires leaving most fossil fuels undeveloped.

Scientists and organizations have validated the idea that the world is under a strict carbon budget for some time now.

In fact, the "Keep It In The Ground" campaign went on all through the long Keystone XL debate and was a rallying cry for activists across the country. That campaign then got a worldwide boost when nearly 200 nations were negotiating the Paris agreement. That's because studies have calculated that to even meet the conservative target of 2°C, the world needs to keep in the ground a third of oil reserves, half of gas reserves, and over 80 percent of current coal reserves from 2010 to 2050.

Andrew Holland, senior fellow for energy and climate at the American Security Project, said it's unclear how successful the petition can be, but suggested there may be a window of opportunity since oil and gas prices are low. "In a low oil price environment they are not able to sell these [leases]," he told ThinkProgress. "You know the government does respond to prize incentives." What's more, a number of oil and gas rigs have gone idle recently.

But if Obama, who is now reaching the last stretch of his presidency, were to use his executive powers, the action could be fragile and ephemeral. An executive action "is a regulatory process that does take time, but that said, the next president can undo it if they take the time to do that, or conversely they can choose not to enforce a previous president executive order." A Republican leadership is unlikely to support such a ban if it were to happen.

Moreover, the petition may have the sponsorship of established groups like the CBD, Riverkeeper and Greenpeace, but it doesn't enjoy the explicit support of major organizations like the Sierra Club or the Natural Resources Defense Council, two of the largest environmental groups that together encompass millions of members.

When reached, the Sierra Club and NRDC said they too advocate for no new extraction of fossil fuels.

However, neither Sakashita nor the Sierra Club or the NRDC explained the absence or its significance.

In a statement to ThinkProgress, an NRDC official said the organization “is working with a range of environmental groups to achieve our goal of phasing out all fossil fuel development on our federal lands and waters.” The NRDC calls on the president to “permanently withdraw both the Arctic and the Atlantic — where there’s no current drilling — from any future oil and gas leasing,” Franz Matzner, director of the Beyond Oil Initiative, said.

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For its part, the Sierra Club said President Obama made significant progress in protecting the coasts when he removed the Atlantic Ocean from the five-year plan. Still, “the Sierra Club is continuing to mobilize its millions of members and supporters to push the administration to stop offshore drilling by removing the Arctic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico from the five-year plan,” Catherine Collentine, senior campaign representative for the Sierra Club, told ThinkProgress in a statement.

Still, Sakashita said the petition shows “a broad coalition of groups coming together to convey this message of Keep It In The Ground.” Indeed, whether groups are working in absolute unison or not, the Keep It In The Ground campaign seems robust all over the country.

Just last week hundreds of people in New Orleans — along with local and national environmental organizations — rallied at the Superdome, where Bureau of Ocean Energy Management officials auctioned off oil and gas drilling rights on 43 million acres in the Gulf.