

Trump administration set to roll out massive offshore oil plan, but many in GOP don't want it

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WASHINGTON – Republicans have eagerly lined up behind President Donald Trump's energy agenda: bringing back coal, expanding mineral extraction on public lands, reviving nuclear energy.

But when it comes to the president's **proposal to massively expand offshore oil and gas drilling**, many GOP leaders in coastal states want no part of exploration near their beaches or maritime communities.

"The administration is well aware of the state's position, which is why we oppose the drilling," **South Carolina GOP Gov. Henry McMaster**, one of Trump's earliest and most ardent supporters, **said in December**.

"I support offshore drilling," Georgia Republican Gov. Kemp **told the Savannah Morning News** a few weeks ago. "I just don't think we need to be doing it off the coast of Georgia."

Kemp and McMaster are among a broad bipartisan, bicoastal anti-drilling set of voices whose opposition could punch a hole in **Trump's America-First Offshore Energy Strategy** – and muddy an issue that figures to be front-and-center during the 2020 elections.

The Trump administration has consistently argued for expanded offshore drilling as a pillar of an economic strategy not only to make U.S. energy secure but also to help reinvigorate the manufacturing sector and boost the growth of high-paying jobs.

The initial plan unveiled in January 2018 included 47 potential lease sales in 25 of the nation's 26 planning areas – 19 sales off the coast of Alaska, seven in the Pacific region, 12 in the Gulf of Mexico, and nine in the Atlantic region.

The plan would apply to federal waters, which begin beyond state waters, generally about three miles from shore.

While declining to address the concerns of individual states, Interior officials said areas included in the initial plan could be reduced in size or removed entirely when the final proposal is issued in the coming weeks.

Republicans have been largely united both on the country's need for energy independence and in condemning the Green New Deal that **progressive Democrats**

rolled out in early February. But with the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon spill that polluted the Gulf of Mexico still a raw memory, they're fragmented on offshore drilling.

Republicans have joined Democrats in introducing bills, writing letters and making both public and private appeals to the administration, all asking for an exemption for their states like the one then-Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke granted to Florida's then-Gov. Rick Scott a year ago.

Florida Republicans are doing their best to make sure that promise is kept, especially as petroleum companies ravenously eye the oil-rich eastern Gulf.

Scott, now a U.S. senator representing the Sunshine State, talks regularly with the president "and will continue to work with the administration to protect the state's coasts and beaches from offshore oil drilling," spokesman Chris Hartline said.

But there's little to suggest those efforts will pay off in the coming weeks when the Interior Department **releases its update of the five-year plan** to open up 90 percent of the Outer Continental Shelf to oil and gas exploration.

A plan for 'energy dominance'

"This is a start (of) American energy dominance," Zinke said 13 months ago when he unveiled the first draft of what would be the largest single expansion of offshore drilling activity ever proposed.

It's not just governors and senators concerned about the plan. Others include:

- Groups representing thousands of coastal businesses have come out strongly against the plan, warning the prospect of oil platforms, even though too far out to see, would hurt their communities, jeopardize tourism, and shrink their bottom lines.
- Fishing interests say more drilling would disrupt habitats and threaten marine stocks tied to their livelihoods.
- At least three federal agencies have weighed in with concerns: The Department of Defense opposes drilling in the Eastern Gulf of Mexico because it would disrupt training exercises; NASA is concerned oil and gas exploration off the Atlantic Coast and Alaska could interfere with launches; and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has raised red flags about drilling's impact on fragile marine stocks such as the endangered Right Whale in the North Atlantic.
- Environmental groups oppose any expansion of fossil fuels, arguing that increased carbon emissions would exacerbate climate change.

In addition, **Diane Hoskins with the conservation organization Oceana**, said the Trump administration's efforts **to roll back offshore oil rig safety rules** enacted in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon disaster would worsen the risk.

'Recipe for disaster'

Deepwater Horizon's spill was "one of the worst man-made disasters in our history. And that's what potentially the Atlantic is facing if we go down this path," Hoskins said. "More drilling. Less safety. A recipe for disaster."

Oceana is one of several groups that on Wednesday sued to stop seismic testing off the mid-Atlantic coast, a precursor to drilling.

Oil and gas industry groups support the president's call for more drilling because of the economic and national security they say it would provide.

Energy exploration sustains hundreds of thousands of jobs, generates billions in economic activity and funnels millions into state government coffers – without compromising safety – every year, according to the **American Petroleum Institute**, the industry's primary trade group.

"For this to continue, U.S. energy policy must include a lasting commitment to expanding offshore oil and natural gas development to new areas," API's Erik Milito wrote in a letter last year to the Trump administration, one of more than 2 million comments about the proposal **posted on the federal website, regulations.gov**.

Green New Deal

The administration's eagerness to expand drilling comes as climate change is rapidly emerging as a campaign issue in the 2020 presidential election.

Democrats are promoting their Green New Deal, a broadly worded treatise – ridiculed by GOP Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., **as a "socialist fantasy"** – that calls for the end of fossil fuels along with vast social justice reforms that include jobs, health care and higher education for all.

Several Democratic presidential candidates have gotten behind the concept of the proposal, emphasizing the environmental thrust over some of its other aspects.

The five-year plan, covering 2019 to 2024, was initiated by the America First Offshore Energy Strategy directive Trump signed in April that could eventually open up Arctic waters and millions of coastal acres off U.S. shores to oil and gas drilling.

Florida hoping to remain exempt

Shortly after the plan became public, representatives of most coastal states lobbied the administration to be exempted. Zinke granted only one exemption – Florida – after a 20-minute conversation with Scott, a fellow Republican.

With both Zinke and Scott no longer in the roles they held when the deal was cut (In January, Zinke left Interior and Scott joined the Senate), concerns have grown that Florida might once again be a candidate for off-shore drilling.

GOP Rep. Francis Rooney, unconvinced that the Eastern Gulf will remain exempt after a current moratorium expires in 2022, last month introduced a bill **to permanently ban oil and gas leasing** and related activities in the region.

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"Offshore drilling will negatively affect our environment, tourism and military readiness," Rooney said. "I am fighting to protect our Florida coast for future generations to enjoy (because) Florida's economy is dependent on clean water and a healthy environment."

The updated version of the administration's offshore drilling plan is scheduled to be released "in the coming weeks," said Tracey Blythe Moriarty, a spokeswoman for the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, part of the Interior Department.

Once released, the public will have 90 days to comment and meetings will be held in coastal cities near areas under consideration for oil and gas leasing. After the comment period, acting Interior Secretary David Bernhardt will determine the schedule of lease sales and geographic areas for inclusion in the final proposal.

The plan will be finalized next year.

"Inclusion of an area in the Proposed Program is not necessarily an indication it will be included in the Proposed Final Program or offered in a lease sale," Moriarty wrote in an email. "Future decisions could be made to reduce or remove areas or sales."

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