

Obama bans oil and gas drilling in Arctic, Atlantic waters

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.23.16

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Adult female walrus rest on an ice flow with young walrus in the Eastern Chukchi Sea, Alaska, in this July 2012 file photo. Photo: S.A. Sonsthagen/U.S. Geological Survey via AP

HONOLULU, Hawaii — President Barack Obama has announced a new ban on offshore oil and gas drilling. It protects most of the U.S.-owned waters in the Arctic Ocean and certain areas in the Atlantic Ocean. Under the new protections, drilling will be permanently off-limits in these waters.

The move helps to put some finishing touches on Obama's environmental record. It will also test President-elect Donald Trump's promise to unleash the nation's untapped energy reserves.

The White House announced the actions together with the government of Canada. The United States' northern neighbor also placed a ban on new drilling in its Arctic waters.

Obama is making use of a little-known provision in a 1953 law. It gives the president the power to restrict fossil fuel production in "any of the unleased lands of the outer Continental Shelf." In other words, it allows Obama to ban offshore drilling in the waters permanently.

Protecting Vulnerable Ecosystems

Environmental groups hope the ban will be difficult for future presidents to reverse. The White House said it was confident the president's order would withstand legal challenges. The language of the law provides no authority for future presidents to undo permanent bans, it said.

The Atlantic waters placed off limits to new drilling stretch from New England to Virginia. Existing drilling activity is not affected by the president's executive actions.

The administration cited environmental concerns in both regions as a reason for the ban. Obama also cited the importance of Arctic seas to native Alaskans and the vulnerability of the ecosystem to an oil spill.

Obama noted the level of fuel production occurring in the Arctic. He said that just 0.1 percent of offshore crude oil production came from the Arctic in 2015. At current oil prices, significant production would not occur there in the future.

The United States must find other economic opportunities for Arctic communities, Obama said.

Environmental Groups See An Urgency

Oil and gas industry officials quickly objected to Obama's memorandum.

The drilling ban will weaken America's "position as a global energy leader," said Dan Naatz. He works for the Independent Petroleum Association of America. Naatz said that Obama's actions could "put America back on a path of energy dependence."

In issuing a permanent ban, Obama appears to be trying to limit the power of Donald Trump, the incoming president. Trump has vowed to lead a domestic energy revolution. He is appointing officials deeply opposed to Obama's environmental and climate change actions.

Environmental groups were calling for a permanent ban even before the presidential election. Trump's victory has provided greater urgency for them and for businesses that rely on tourism and fishing. Trump has said he intends to use all available fuel reserves for energy self-sufficiency. He has also said that it's time to open up offshore drilling.

Obama's decision will protect "coastal tourism and fishing businesses from offshore drilling," said Jacqueline Savitz. She is senior vice president at the conservation group Oceana. Offshore drilling, she said, "threatens coastal livelihoods."

Staying Power Of A Permanent Ban

A key question is how difficult it will be for future presidents to overturn Obama's decision should they try to do so. There are disagreements about the answer.

In 2008, President George W. Bush used a simple memorandum to remove previously withdrawn lands and make them available for drilling. The American Petroleum Institute pointed to this as a way to get around the new ban.

"Fortunately, there is no such thing as a permanent ban," the institute's Erik Milito said.

But White House officials on a conference call with reporters voiced confidence that the president's decision will stand.

Meanwhile, environmental groups were already issuing warnings to those who might challenge the ban. They said they were prepared to go to court to protect it during future administrations.

Some Say More Protections Are Needed

Some wish the protections had gone further, including Frank Knapp. He is the president of the South Carolina Small Business Chamber of Commerce. Knapp said he was "extremely disappointed" that the drilling ban does not protect the entire Atlantic coast.

Knapp and his group were among a number of business groups in the southeast who fought to ban new drilling off their shores. The groups argued that the environmental effects would hurt fishing, tourism and other businesses in the region. Knapp had gone to Washington to meet with Obama administration officials. He believed the entire Atlantic was to be protected under the new ban.

The decision came as the Obamas spend the holidays in Hawaii. Some Democratic lawmakers applauded the president, while some Republicans were highly critical.

"President Obama has ... put the interests of millions of Americans ahead of those of Big Oil with these permanent protections," Democratic Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts said.

"The extremes to which this president will go to appease special interests never ceases to amaze," countered Republican Representative Rob Bishop of Utah. "This is not a moral calling; it's an abuse of power."

Quiz

- 1 What is the MOST important reason why President Obama wants to ban oil and gas leasing in certain areas?
- (A) to make Donald Trump's presidency difficult
 - (B) to protect the environment
 - (C) to promote oil drilling in other areas
 - (D) to protect fishermen

- 2 Which answer choice accurately characterizes oil and gas industry officials' reaction to Obama's ban?
- (A) They believe that the decision will help protect the environment.
 - (B) They believe the ban will hurt large companies but protect small business owners.
 - (C) They believe that the ban will harm coastal communities and livelihoods.
 - (D) They believe it will harm America as a energy leader and hurt the new president.

- 3 Read the following sentence from the section "Some Say More Protections Are Needed."

Some Democratic lawmakers applauded the president, while some Republicans were highly critical.

Which two phrases could replace the phrases "applauded" and "highly critical" in the sentence above?

- (A) clapped at; examining the evidence
- (B) praised; very disapproving
- (C) congratulated; extremely curious
- (D) celebrated; outraged

- 4 Read the following paragraph from the section "Environmental Groups See An Urgency."

Environmental groups were calling for a permanent ban even before the presidential election. Trump's victory has provided greater urgency for them and for businesses that rely on tourism and fishing. Trump has said he intends to use all available fuel reserves for energy self-sufficiency.

Which phrase from the paragraph helps the reader understand the attitude of environmentalists toward protection?

- (A) calling for
- (B) permanent ban
- (C) greater urgency
- (D) intends to use

Answer Key

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