



### **Shhh: Public Comments Favor Drilling**

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An email last fall from a top Interior Department official indicates public comments ran two-to-one in favor of a [Bush administration plan](#) to expand offshore drilling.

The email from **Liz Birnbaum**, director of the Minerals Management Service which manages the nation's offshore oil and natural gas reserves, also suggests how Interior Secretary **Ken Salazar** could avoid publicly acknowledging the support for the plan, which calls for opening the Atlantic seaboard to drilling, a step many environmentalists and some Democrats oppose.

"The Secretary may get questions about this [Freedom of Information Act] request while he's in Houston ... We do have a preliminary tabulation of the comments, it has not yet gone to the Secretary," according to the email dated last Oct. 27 and sent to several Salazar aides. "So the Secretary can honestly say in response to any questions that he's [SIC] has not yet seen the analysis of the comments – staff is still working on it. I did, however, confirm to him the 2-1 split that these guys are emphasizing."

"These guys" would be officials at [American Solutions for Winning the Future](#), a Washington-based group led by former GOP House Speaker **Newt Gingrich**. The group advocates expanded offshore petroleum drilling. It obtained the email this week through a Freedom of Information Act request, and shared it with Washington Wire.

The proposal, published by the Bush administration on its last business day in office, is awaiting a decision by Salazar. Shortly after taking office, Salazar [extended the public comment period](#) by 180 days. Oil and gas industry officials and Republicans [accused the secretary](#) of foot-dragging.

The department [said in September](#), after the comment period ended, that it received more than 530,000 comments, but didn't say how many were in favor or opposed.

A spokeswoman for Birnbaum said the agency hasn't yet finished analyzing the comments, and that the breakdown Birnbaum gave in her email was preliminary. The spokeswoman added that the comments are posted and available for inspection at [regulations.gov](#).

"In general, comments received do not easily break down into 'pro' and 'con' categories," she said. "MMS's analysis of the comments, which is still under way, will appropriately reflect the nuances of many different views of where and how to responsibly develop offshore oil and gas."

Gingrich's group says the email gives new meaning to Obama's statement in [his State of the Union address](#) last month that he foresees "tough decisions" about opening new offshore areas for oil and gas development.

"They're going to have to explain why, if they're opposed to [the Bush proposal], they're going to disregard public opinion," said **Vince Haley**, the group's vice president for policy.

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