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### **Salazar says he may wait on offshore drilling plan**

Matthew Daly, AP  
September 17, 2009

WASHINGTON — Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said Thursday he's in no hurry to make a decision on whether to allow offshore drilling in federal waters off Alaska and other states, a remark that disappointed advocates of offshore drilling for oil and gas.

Salazar, who met with Alaska Gov. Sean Parnell on Thursday, told reporters he's uncertain whether the Interior Department will seek to put a new five-year drilling plan in place before the existing leasing program runs out in 2012.

The Interior Department is taking comment until Sept. 21 on a Bush administration proposal to open vast waters off the Pacific and Atlantic coasts to oil and gas drilling. The proposed five-year plan, which would open up areas where drilling has been banned for a quarter-century, includes newly identified areas for drilling in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas off Alaska's northern coast.

While the Interior Department is considered unlikely to adopt the Bush-era proposal wholesale, it remains unclear whether the Obama administration will allow any expansion of Outer Continental Shelf drilling.

The current plan is in place until 2012, so legally the department has until 2012 to redo a plan on the Outer Continental Shelf, Salazar said.

"Whether we take that long or not is something we'll decide based on the information we collected and the analysis that's been done during this period," he said. "I haven't yet reached a decision yet on what the next steps are going to be."

Salazar's comments should not be over-interpreted, spokeswoman Kendra Barkoff said. The comments were first reported by Greenwire.

"We want to ensure that we are 100 percent comfortable with where we are," Barkoff said. "We're not going to rush into something."

Still, Salazar's remarks enraged some Republicans, who accused the secretary of imposing a backdoor moratorium on drilling through inaction.

Waiting until 2012 means that a six-month public comment period will soon become a three-year ban on offshore drilling, said Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Wash., senior Republican on the House Natural Resources Committee.

"This is unacceptable and irresponsible energy policy," he said. "It will cost American jobs, hurt our economy and increase our dependence on foreign oil."

Shortly after taking office, Salazar ordered a review of offshore oil and gas development, scrapping a sweeping blueprint for expanded offshore drilling proposed in the Bush administration's final days.

Salazar didn't rule out expanded offshore drilling, but criticized "the enormous sweep" of the Bush proposal, which envisioned energy development from New England to Alaska, including lease sales in areas off California and in the North Atlantic that have been off-limits for a quarter century.

Salazar set a Sept. 21 deadline for public comment on the drilling plan and attended four regional hearings, including sessions in Anchorage and San Francisco, to gather information.

Parnell and other Alaska officials have pushed for drilling, saying a responsible offshore drilling plan is vitally important to Alaska and the nation. Parnell, who took office in July after former Gov. Sarah Palin stepped down, said Alaska's portion of the Outer Continental Shelf contains an estimated 27 billion barrels of oil and 130 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Citing a University of Alaska study, Parnell said shelf production in Alaska could provide an annual average of 35,000 jobs for 50 years, and \$72 billion in new payroll.

"We have a rich reserve of oil and gas and we have a nation that needs it," Parnell said Thursday. "Alaskan jobs and the nation's energy security are at stake. Any delay would be harmful."

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, said Alaska's three members of Congress agree on the need to open up the Outer Continental Shelf to more oil and gas development.

"It's irresponsible to gripe about volatility in the international markets and rely on imports from dangerous and unreliable regimes while our country has tremendous oil and gas resources we are unwilling to tap," she said.

Meanwhile, more than 400 scientists from the United States and 20 other countries signed a strongly worded letter urging the Obama administration to defer offshore oil and gas development in the Arctic Ocean until research can adequately assess potential risks to fragile marine ecosystems.

The scientists said the Bush-era proposal was made without sufficient understanding of the environmental consequences for the Chukchi and Beaufort seas and lacked full

consultation with Alaska resident and native groups.

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