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One year later, GOP pushes federal leasing plans

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Ben Geman, E&E News

Republicans and oil industry groups are using the one year mark of last year's offshore drilling ban expiration to push for wider leasing in federal waters, alleging the Obama administration is delaying access to potentially large U.S. reserves.

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"When our country has its own rich oil and natural gas resources, we should not have to even think about unpredictable threats from mad men, tyrants and dictators who control access to a significant portion of the world's oil supply," he said in a prepared statement. Rep. Paul Broun (R-Ga.) marked what Republicans have tagged "Energy Freedom Day" by announcing a new bill he said is aimed at limiting "frivolous" challenges to energy development.

The bill "expedites judicial review by imposing a 60-day deadline on legal challenges, requires that the loser pays in most legal proceedings, and prevents forum shopping by requiring cases to be filed in the District Court for the District of Columbia," according to Broun's office.

Some lawmakers who are considered fence-sitters in the congressional climate debate, such as Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), also want wider OCS production.

Longstanding congressional bans on outer continental shelf leasing that covered the Atlantic and Pacific coasts expired on Oct. 1, 2008.

The expiration came after congressional Democrats dropped efforts to renew the annual limits, following heavy election year pressure from Republicans and pro-drilling members of their caucus at a time of record gasoline prices. Former President George W. Bush had removed largely overlapping executive bans that summer.

The Interior Department has estimated that the areas that had been under leasing bans may contain 18 billion barrels of oil and 76 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. But advocates of expanded drilling say the numbers are probably on the low side because they are not based on newer exploration technologies.

Republicans want Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to draft a leasing program that makes use of areas that are no longer covered by the bans that date back to the early 1980s. Salazar is reviewing scores of comments on an OCS drilling leasing plan to cover 2010-2015 that was proposed in the waning days of the Bush administration. Advocates of wider drilling say Interior has been dragging its feet on offshore policy.

"One year later, our American resources are as far out of reach as they were before this ban expired. Because the Interior Department continues to slow-walk its 5-year offshore energy plan, a de facto ban remains intact," said Barry Russell, CEO of the Independent Petroleum Association of America, in a statement.

The plan, which would replace the current 2007-2012 program, opens several Atlantic and Pacific coast regions to oil and gas drilling, and also includes more Alaskan and eastern Gulf of Mexico leasing than the current program.

While Salazar's Interior Department is very unlikely to endorse the expansive Bush-era proposal, it remains unclear what new regions, if any, Interior may seek to open beyond what is already available.

An expansive energy bill approved by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in June includes a provision that would pare back restrictions on eastern Gulf of Mexico oil and gas development. It allows leasing as close as 45 miles from Florida's gulf shores, and even closer in a region south of Pensacola called Destin Dome eyed for its natural gas.

The bill, [S. 1462](#), would upend a 2006 compromise law that provides Florida a buffer of 100 to 235 miles, depending on the area, until mid-2022. Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) is pressing for removal of the language.

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