

# Future of offshore drilling ban remains unclear

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WASHINGTON -- The Obama administration on Thursday imposed a swath of new safety mandates on offshore drilling, launching the first of a series of rules designed to stiffen oversight of the oil and gas industry in response to the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

But Interior Secretary Ken Salazar gave no signal of whether he would lift the administration's deepwater drilling ban before it expires Nov. 30 - saying only that the moratorium would end when he was "comfortable that we have significantly reduced those risks" inherent to offshore exploration.

The new drilling safety requirements, which go into effect as soon as they are published, will govern the design of wells, critical offshore safety equipment and the emergency training of rig workers.

A separate, long-awaited worker safety rule - that was proposed before the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon rig - will force oil and gas companies to implement comprehensive risk management systems.

Together, Salazar said, the mandates are part of a bid to stiffen "safety, oversight and environmental protection at every stage of the drilling process."

Bigger changes will be proposed soon.

"Over the coming months, you can expect a dynamic regulatory environment as we continue to raise the bar for offshore oil and gas development," Salazar said in a speech. "We will be as clear and straightforward as possible as we implement these changes. "The new rule attempts to eliminate vulnerabilities that were revealed by the BP oil spill, which was unleashed when natural gas surged unchecked out of BP's doomed Macondo well and ignited on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig. The resulting explosion killed 11 people and triggered the worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history.

Under the new rule, engineers must sign off on well casing and cementing plans and certify that there are at least two independent barriers across each potential path for flowing oil and gas.

Companies also will have to get federal regulators to sign off on any plan to replace heavier drilling fluids with lighter materials, such as sea water that might not weigh enough to overcome well pressure.

The administration also is requiring independent certification and beefed-up testing of blowout preventers.