

# Obama's offshore drilling plan seen as a political olive branch

*The president announces the controversial proposal, which the administration sees as a way to garner support from conservatives for clean energy and climate change legislation.*

**Jim Tankersley and Richard Simon, Los Angeles Times, 3-31-10**

WASHINGTON — President Obama, after delaying and deliberating for a year, unveiled a controversial offshore drilling plan Wednesday that was driven largely by the politics of his agenda on energy and climate change -- not by hopes of changing the nation's energy supply.

As a presidential candidate, Obama was attacked by Republicans for not supporting all-out expansion of offshore drilling. And one of his administration's first acts after he took office last year was to cancel the long-term offshore plans President George W. Bush had released at the end of his tenure.

But now, the White House sees its new drilling plan as a way to curry favor with Republicans and moderate Democrats whose support will be critical if Obama is to steer his energy and climate change legislation through Congress.

Under the plan, Obama proposed moving toward drilling off the Atlantic and Alaskan coastlines, as well as in the eastern Gulf of Mexico, in areas that have been off-limits to oil and gas exploration for up to three decades.

The proposal includes no drilling off California, Oregon or Washington state, or in Alaska's Bristol Bay, which environmentalists consider especially sensitive.

Obama pitched the decision in national security terms and called it "part of a broader strategy that will move us from an economy that runs on fossil fuels and foreign oil to one that relies more on homegrown fuels and clean energy."

Analysts cautioned that under the most favorable circumstances, the plan would take years to begin producing new oil and suggested it would not reduce oil imports or gasoline prices substantially.

But making a commitment to develop new domestic supplies of oil and natural gas, especially offshore, is seen as an important overture to Republicans and other conservatives, who attacked Obama relentlessly on the issue in 2008.

A small bipartisan group of senators is trying to piece together 60 votes to pass some version of Obama's long-sought bill to limit greenhouse gas emissions and boost clean-energy production. The new offshore plan is aimed especially at potential Republican votes.

"The president's view is that this is the best policy, and that working with members of the Senate on both sides, the Republicans and the Democrats, this is policy that people of both political persuasions can agree to and we can move forward on," Deputy Press Secretary Bill Burton said after the drilling announcement.

The outreach drew warm, but not overwhelming, reviews from its target audience.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), one of the senators drafting the climate bill and a major proponent of using the legislation to expand drilling, called Obama's plan "a good first step" but said "there is more that must be done to make this proposal meaningful and the game-changer we all want it to become."

The spokesman for another drilling proponent and potential GOP climate bill supporter, Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, also praised Obama's drilling plan but said Murkowski will judge a climate bill "by its own merits."

Obama's announcement drew criticism from the poles of both parties. Conservatives complained it would "lock up" more swaths of ocean than it would open to drilling.

"If the president is trying to offer an olive branch in order to pass climate change, this hardly qualifies as any major step," said Rep. Doc Hastings of Washington, the top Republican on the Natural Resources Committee.

Environmental groups had harsh words as well.

"It makes no sense to threaten the East Coast of America with spills and other drilling disasters when we're about to unleash the real solutions to oil dependence -- cleaner cars and cleaner fuels," said Anna Aurilio, who directs the Washington office of the nonprofit Environment America.

Daniel Yergin, chairman of IHS Cambridge Energy Research Associates, said in an interview that the economic boost from Obama's plan could be three to five years away.

"If this gets going, it would create a lot of onshore jobs," particularly in hard-hit East Coast shipping communities, he said, "but not overnight."

Even as they touted the drilling plan as proof of Obama's commitment to all types of domestic energy production, administration officials cautioned that drilling alone would not produce anything close to energy independence.

"It's still a relatively minor amount relative to the oil and natural gas that we import," Interior Secretary Ken Salazar told reporters after the announcement. "This is not the panacea."