

New US offshore oil leasing plan includes Arctic

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A dog walks along the frozen Arctic Ocean in Browerville, Alaska, in 2006. The Obama administration on Tuesday proposed a new plan for offshore oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico and off the coast of Alaska, including the environmentally sensitive Arctic.

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The proposed program for 2012-2017 sets out 12 lease sales for areas owned by the federal government in the [Gulf of Mexico](#) and three in Alaska, including the [Beaufort Sea](#) and [Chukchi Sea](#) areas off the northern Alaskan coast, and Cook Inlet.

But it did not open up for exploration the politically sensitive Atlantic or

Pacific coastlines, or the eastern Gulf of Mexico along the Florida coast.

Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) said the program was in line with President Barack Obama's direction "to continue to expand safe and responsible domestic production."

Under the proposal, more than 75 percent of the estimated undiscovered oil and [gas resources](#) on the US outer continental shelf (OCS) are opened up to lease sales, he said.

"Expanding safe and responsible oil and gas production from the OCS is a key component of our comprehensive energy strategy to grow America's [energy economy](#), and will help us continue to reduce our dependence on foreign oil and create jobs here at home," Salazar said.

Salazar acknowledged the sensitivity of expanding exploration in the Arctic, "where we must proceed cautiously, safely and based on the best science available."

The proposal includes the first lease sales in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas since 2008, before Obama became president.

Since then, and especially after the April 2010 BP-Deepwater Horizon blowout and oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the administration has been cautious about proceeding with new offshore exploration and development.

The Interior Department said the new Arctic sales were scheduled only late in the five-year period to allow for further scientific study and data collection, and longer term planning for spill response preparedness and infrastructure.

"In Alaska and off its coast, the proposed program recommends that the

current inventory of already-leased areas in the Arctic should be expanded only after additional evaluations have been completed, and in a manner that accounts for the Arctic's unique environmental resources and the social, cultural, and subsistence needs of Native Alaskan communities," said David Hayes, Interior's deputy secretary.

The department will accept public comment on the proposal until January 9, and submit the final plan to Congress and the White House.

Environmental group the Sierra Club was quick to blast the plan, saying Arctic drilling could "jeopardize one of our nation's last wild frontiers."

"The risk to the fragile Arctic area and Alaska communities is clear," said Athan Manuel, Sierra Club director of lands protection.

"Spill prevention, containment and response systems are not equipped to work in challenging Arctic conditions -- in short, when there is a spill in the [Arctic](#), we will not be able to clean it up."

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