

Obama declares parts of Arctic off-limits for oil drilling

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US President Barack Obama disembarks Air Force One

US President Barack Obama on Friday declared portions of the Arctic off-limits for oil exploration for the next five years, dealing a blow to Republican efforts to expand fossil fuel extraction.

The decision means new oil and gas exploration leasing in the Chukchi Sea and Beaufort Sea will not be considered until after 2022.

"Given the unique and challenging Arctic environment and industry's declining interest in the area, forgoing lease sales in the Arctic is the right path forward," Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said in a statement.

The US government made a similar announcement in March, when it removed the Atlantic Ocean from the five-year road map.

Environmental groups hailed Friday's decision as historic and coming at a key moment, as President-elect Donald Trump has promised to expand drilling for oil and to revive the American coal industry.

"Today's news couldn't come at a better time," said the Sierra Club.

"President Obama has protected the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans from Big Oil."

The decision will protect wildlife migration routes, crucial feeding grounds, seafloor habitats and the larger Arctic marine ecosystem, said the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Oceana's [senior vice president](#) for the United States, Jackie Savitz, said she was "hopeful" about charting a new course for protecting the Arctic, rather than trying to exploit it.



US President Barack Obama speaks at the Global Leadership conference in the Arctic on August 31, 2015 in Anchorage, Alaska

"The decades-long push to drill in the Arctic has put this unique and diverse ecosystem at risk, cost tens of billions of dollars and created significant controversy without providing the promised benefits," she said.

"Companies have been given every opportunity to find oil and have failed at every turn because of the extreme conditions and limited window for operations there."

The US plans offered 11 potential lease sales—10 in the Gulf of Mexico and one off the coast of Alaska in the Cook Inlet area.

"The plan focuses lease sales in the best places -- those with the highest resource potential, lowest conflict, and established infrastructure -- and

removes regions that are simply not right to lease," said Jewell.

House Speaker Paul Ryan, a Republican from Wisconsin, said lawmakers would work to overturn the plan.

"In its final days, the Obama administration is throwing up more barriers to American energy development," Ryan said in a statement.

"This plan to exclude the resource-rich Arctic from exploration possibilities squanders our ability to harness the abundant, affordable energy sources that power our economy," he added.

"We will work to overturn this plan, and to open up the Arctic and other offshore areas for development."

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