

Obama admin blocks seismic surveys in Atlantic Ocean

January 6 2017, by Matthew Daly

The Obama administration on Friday rejected requests by energy companies to conduct seismic surveys in the Atlantic Ocean to map potential drilling sites for oil and natural gas.

The Interior Department said it denied six pending applications in part because President Barack Obama has blocked Atlantic drilling under a five-year offshore drilling plan finalized late last year.

Environmental groups and many East Coast lawmakers oppose the surveys, saying that loud sounds from seismic air guns could hurt marine life.

The advocacy group Oceana applauded the announcement by Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, saying the Obama administration was "finishing the job in protecting the Atlantic Ocean from offshore drilling activities."

Last month, Obama designated the bulk of U.S.-owned waters in the Arctic Ocean and certain areas in the Atlantic as indefinitely off limits to oil and gas leasing. The Dec. 20 designation was in addition to a five-year drilling plan announced in November that also blocked Atlantic drilling.

Environmental groups hope the indefinite ban, which relies on an arcane provision in a 1953 law, will be difficult for President-elect Donald Trump or other presidents to reverse. The White House said it's

confident the president's order will withstand legal challenge and said the language of the statute provides no authority for subsequent presidents to undo so-called permanent withdrawals of oil and gas leases from the Outer Continental Shelf.

The Atlantic waters placed off limits by Obama's order are 31 canyons stretching off the coast of New England south to Virginia.

Proposed seismic surveys that were rejected Friday stretch from Delaware to the northern half of Florida.

A top lobbying group for the offshore industry slammed Obama's latest action to thwart offshore drilling.

"The blanket denial of seismic survey permits is an unsurprising attempt to put another nail in the coffin of sensible energy exploration in the Atlantic," said Randall Luthi, president of the National Ocean Industries Association.

The decision "continues the Obama administration's dismissal of scientifically-backed offshore policies and ignores the fact that seismic and other geophysical surveys have been safely conducted offshore ... for more than 50 years," Luthi said, adding that there has been no documented scientific evidence of seismic surveys harming marine mammals or the environment.

Lawmakers reacted largely along party lines, with most Democrats applauding the move and Republicans opposed. There were some exceptions.

Rep. Mark Sanford, R-S.C., hailed the move, calling it "a big win" for coastal communities in his state that could be harmed by oil spills or other environmental problems. "It makes little sense to conduct seismic

testing off the Atlantic coast, when the Atlantic Ocean has been excluded as a possible site for offshore drilling for the next five years," Sanford said.

Energy companies are free to submit new applications to the incoming Trump administration, and Trump can overturn Obama's drilling plan, but the process is likely to take months or years. The indefinite ban imposed by Obama also faces a potential challenge, although the ultimate outcome is unclear.

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Citation: Obama admin blocks seismic surveys in Atlantic Ocean (2017, January 6) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-01-obama-admin-blocks-seismic-surveys.html>

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