



For Immediate Release, March 31, 2010

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Obama Offshore Oil Plan a Disaster for Wildlife and Climate

WASHINGTON— Today President Obama released details of a new national offshore oil-drilling plan that would greatly expand oil leasing far beyond that which was ever authorized by the Bush administration. Prime polar bear habitat in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas off Alaska, opened for leasing under the Bush administration, would remain open to development, while large swaths of the Atlantic Coast and eastern Gulf of Mexico would be opened for the first time.

“Today’s announcement is unfortunately all too typical of what we have seen so far from President Obama – promises of change, a year of ‘deliberation,’ and ultimately, adoption of flawed and outdated Bush policies as his own,” said Brendan Cummings, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity. “Rather than bring about the change we need, this plan will further our national addiction to oil and contribute to global warming, while at the same time directly despoiling the habitat of polar bears, endangered whales, and other imperiled wildlife.”

Oil development in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas, home to all of America’s polar bears, is strongly opposed by conservation groups as no technologies exist to clean up oil spills in icy waters. Oil development in the Beaufort Sea would likely also be visible from the shores of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Today’s plan would allow existing leases in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas to move forward while the remainder of these areas would be subject to additional leasing following further environmental studies.

The only bright spot in today’s announcement was that a lease sale proposed in Alaska’s Bristol Bay, within critical habitat for the North Pacific right whale, the world’s most endangered whale, would be cancelled. However, important habitat for the similarly endangered North Atlantic right whale would be opened in its stead.

The Center for Biological Diversity and other organizations filed a court challenge to the 2007-2012 offshore oil leasing plan issued by the Bush administration. The Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia set aside that plan for failing to adequately assess the environmental impacts of opening up areas off Alaska to drilling. Today’s announcement comes partially in response to that court ruling.

Earlier this year, Obama’s Interior Secretary, Ken Salazar approved Shell’s plans to drill this summer on existing leases in the Beaufort and Chukchi. Litigation against that plan is ongoing.

“Short of sending Sarah Palin back to Alaska to personally club polar bear cubs to death, the Obama administration could not have come up with a more efficient extinction plan for the polar bear,” added Cummings.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 255,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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