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Environmental Groups Decry Obama Plan to Lift Moratorium on Offshore Drilling

Environmental groups are denouncing President Obama's controversial new plan to open up large swaths of the Atlantic, Gulf and Alaskan coasts to offshore oil and gas drilling. On Wednesday, the Obama administration said it would lift a longstanding moratorium on oil drilling along the East Coast from Delaware to the central coast of Florida. New areas of the southeast Gulf Coast will also be open to drilling, as will the Arctic Ocean north of Alaska. We speak to Brendan Cummings of the Center for Biological Diversity, which helped stall the original 2007-2012 offshore oil drilling plan under the Bush administration. [includes rush transcript]

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Guest:

Brendan Cummings, Public Lands Director at the [Center for Biological Diversity](#).

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RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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JUAN GONZALEZ: Environmental groups are strongly denouncing President Obama's controversial new plan to open up large swaths of the Atlantic, Gulf and Alaskan coasts to offshore oil and gas drilling. On Wednesday, Obama and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced an end to a longstanding moratorium on oil drilling along the East Coast from Delaware to the central coast of Florida. New areas of the southeast Gulf Coast will also be open to drilling, as will the Arctic Ocean north of Alaska. The only area that will be protected is Bristol Bay in southwestern Alaska.

In announcing the proposal from Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland on Wednesday, Obama said, quote, "This is not a decision that I've made lightly."

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: There will be those who strongly disagree with this decision, including those who say we should not open any new areas to drilling. But what I want to emphasize is that this announcement is 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. And the only way this transition will succeed is if it strengthens our economy in the short term and the long run. To fail to recognize this reality would be a mistake.

Now, on the other side, there are going to be some who argue that we don't go nearly far enough, who suggest we should open all our waters to energy exploration without any restriction or regard for the broader environmental and economic impact. And to those folks, I've got to say this: we have less than two percent of the world's oil reserves; we consume more than 20 percent of the world's oil. And what that means is that drilling alone can't come close to meeting our long-term energy needs. And for the sake of our planet and our energy independence, we need to begin the transition to cleaner fuels now.

So the answer is not drilling everywhere all the time, but the answer is not also for us to ignore the fact that we are going to need vital energy sources to maintain our economic growth and our security. Ultimately, we need to move beyond the tired debates of the left and the right, between business leaders and environmentalists, between those who would claim drilling is a cure-all and those who would claim it has no place, because this issue is just too important to allow our progress to languish while we fight the same old battles over and over again.

AMY GOODMAN: While the oil industry, business groups and some Republicans offered muted support for the Obama administration's proposal, environmental groups and a number of Democrats are raising concerns.

For more, we're joined on the phone now from California by Brendan Cummings, the Public Lands Director at the Center for Biological Diversity. The Center was one of the plaintiffs in the case that brought the Bush administration's original 2007-to-2012 offshore oil drilling plan to a standstill a year ago and triggered the review of this plan, which was announced yesterday.

Brendan Cummings, welcome to *Democracy Now!* Your response to President Obama's announcement?

BRENDAN CUMMINGS: It's horribly disappointing. Rather than instituting a fundamental change of the failed energy policies of the Bush-Cheney era, what we saw yesterday is Obama essentially embracing wholeheartedly the policy of — that we can really drill our way to energy independence, that we can drill our way out of the climate crisis, and that somehow it's OK to permanently sacrifice some of the most sensitive, some of the most ecologically important areas of our nation just for short-term political gain. And that's horrendously disappointing, and we would have hoped for far better from the President.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And Brendan Cummings, what about how important would this drilling be, even in terms of oil supply, because clearly, thirty years ago, the Reagan administration argued for offshore drilling as a way to help establish energy independence for the United States, but we have only continued to use more oil and been more dependent on fossil fuels?

BRENDAN CUMMINGS: Right, exactly. If we're ever to achieve energy independence, we really need to move away from oil. We need to move towards truly renewable sources. And we also need to greatly reduce our consumption of energy. Unfortunately, this does neither.

Offshore oil drilling, announcing and opening up new areas for leasing, is a very slow process. The initial environmental harm comes quickly with the exploratory drilling, the seismic surveys, things of that sort. But the actual oil doesn't come for market — to market for years, if not decades. So it has very little real impact on either the national or the global economy of oil.

But where it does impact is in the areas that are actually drilled, and of course politically, because here Obama is, in essence, just agreeing with the critiques, the "drill, baby, drill" critique of two years ago, that, as a candidate, he was critical of. And instead, now he seems to be adopting that idea that, yes, politically we have to make the concession of drilling if we want to advance positive energy policies. And that's absurd.

JUAN GONZALEZ: But what about his argument that he wants to move beyond the tired old debates between left and right on this issue and try to establish a new common ground for how to deal with oil exploration off coast?

BRENDAN CUMMINGS: Unfortunately, that frame from Obama is all too typical in his environmental policies. But there is no left and right in an oil spill. We have no existing technologies to clean up an oil spill in the icy conditions in the Arctic. Drilling in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas off Alaska is likely to be a disaster for the polar bear, for the native communities that live on the coast of Alaska, for the endangered whales of the area, for the coastlines of Florida, if we drill in those areas. And that's not a left-or-right debate. That's not a debate over protecting everything or an energy policy that allows greater access to American energy. You can't debate an oil spill; you can only prevent it. And in certain areas of our country, certain areas of our coast, they're so sensitive, the only way to truly prevent it is to never open these areas up for drilling in the first place.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Brendan Cummings with the Public Lands Program. He's Public Lands Director of the Center for Biological Diversity. Who benefits from this new policy, Brendan?

BRENDAN CUMMINGS: In the short term, oil companies. For example, in Alaska, one of the most contested lease sale areas is the Chukchi Sea of Alaska, which was open for drilling under Bush, offered for leasing in February 2008, an action that was almost universally condemned by Democrats in Congress, condemned by Obama himself, yet that area, yesterday Obama embraced it as "we will allow it to go forward." Shell Oil has plans to drill in the area this summer. To date, Ken Salazar, Obama's Secretary of Interior, has rubber-stamped Shell's approval each step of the way. We're fighting them in court. But Shell will be the first beneficiary of this.

But I think the other beneficiary of this is those on the right, those in the Republican Party, those in the — who are attached to the fossil fuel industry, who've once again been affirmed that if they scream loud enough, if they put enough pressure on Obama, things that were supposedly core principles of his, things that, you know, he promised at certain points during the campaign, those will all readily be sacrificed with just a simple bit of criticism from the right. So I think those who believe that they can continue to push Obama to the right had a lot to cheer yesterday, because they succeeded.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Now, what about the areas that he declared off-limits? Bristol Bay in Alaska, also the entire coastline of California was declared off-limits by Obama. Could you talk about some of the reasoning behind those decisions?

BRENDAN CUMMINGS: Yes. California is pretty straightforward. It's politically untenable to open up new areas in California for drilling. And so that was never — never truly on the table. At the tail end of the Bush administration, Bush's Interior Secretary, Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, proposed to open California for drilling, really as a straw man, because everyone knew it wasn't actually going to be opened up, but it let Obama claim that he was removing areas for drilling.

Bristol Bay is a much more interesting case. This is an area off Alaska. It's home to the most endangered large whale in the world, the North Pacific right whale, which there's perhaps fewer than fifty remaining individuals of this species of whale in this area of the Bering Sea off Alaska. This area is also home to one of our most productive fisheries in the United States. Whenever you hear of wild Alaska salmon, it probably came from Bristol Bay.

And there was tremendous pressure to drill in this area. But there also was tremendous organizing by the environmental community, by the local communities in the Bristol Bay region, by the fishermen. And Bristol Bay is a nice example of, even given the politics of Alaska, given all the pressure to drill, folks who were opposed to drilling that, whether they cared about endangered whales or their livelihoods as fishermen, organized and were able to put enough political pressure that even the Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, who has positioned herself as enemy number one against climate regulation, she had to concede the drilling in Bristol Bay was a bad idea. So that is the one bright spot. But it only happened because people very vocally pushed for the protection of that area and set forth that drilling there was clearly unacceptable. And hopefully we'll see similar movements like that form elsewhere in the country in areas that are now going to be on the table for drilling.

AMY GOODMAN: I'm looking at Phil Radford's quote. He's executive director of Greenpeace, who said, "Is this President Obama's clean energy plan or Palin's drill, baby, drill campaign?" On the other hand, I was watching Newt Gingrich, the former Speaker of the House, applauding President Obama. Lindsey Graham, the senator, said, "I appreciate the President's apparent willingness to consider offshore drilling as part of the administration's energy policy." Do you think he's doing this so soon after signing the healthcare bill as a kind of solve to reach out to those that he feels he alienated?

BRENDAN CUMMINGS: I think that's very much part of it. He is briefly in a window of popularity where the folks who expected him to bring change are — who've been disappointed for the past year, you know, have a glimmer of hope with the healthcare bill, as flawed as that may be. So, yes, so there is some time for political cover for a bad announcement.

I think it was also tied into the timing of certain things. One, a pure legal deadline to make a new finding on the Bush era plan. Also, we're entering the point in the climate debate in the Senate where the Kerry-Lieberman-Graham bill, which would, if it passed, do similar things, sacrifice large areas to offshore drilling as a political tradeoff to get a cap-and-trade scheme in place. That's slowly starting to gain momentum.

And I think this announcement, within that context of the Obama administration saying, "Yes, we're willing to deal, we're willing to give the oil industry what it wants in exchange for getting something," unfortunately, the announcement yesterday is unclear whether it will get anything positive in return, in terms of clean energy policies. You know, as it looks to me, it's essentially just a giveaway to the oil industry and to the critics of Obama who say he's not doing enough for that oil industry.

AMY GOODMAN: Brendan Cummings, we're going to leave it there, Public Lands Director of the Center for Biological Diversity, speaking to us from the desert in California.



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