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## 'Drill, baby, drill' and online comment boards



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As the summer temperatures heat up, so too do the controversies surrounding oil and gas production in the States.

In particular, drilling offshore in the US Outer Continental Shelf has become a news item as President Donald Trump continues in his efforts to roll back restrictions on drilling, some put in place during the waning days of the Obama administration - after President Trump's election, in more than two dozen areas of US waters.

Just prior to the 4 July holiday, the Department of the Interior began its process of seeking public comments on the impacts that drilling might have in the Gulf of Mexico, North Atlantic Ocean, Arctic Ocean and Pacific Ocean, including waters of Alaska and the Lower 48. The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), the agency dealing with offshore energy development- had released a plan that significantly pared back activity going out five years, to 2022.

Now, the BOEM, which, as part of the Department of the Interior is in the Executive branch of the U.S. Government, has taken steps to re-open drilling during the 2019- 2024 timeframe- following up on a late April "Executive Order" issued by President Trump. A link to this early July announcement and request for comments, on plans to open up drilling can be found here: <https://www.boem.gov/82-FR-30886/> (<https://www.boem.gov/82-FR-30886/>)

The possible easing of impediments to offshore drilling comes at a time that the Presidential pendulum is shifting away from Obama administration environmentally-driven restrictions. Opinions of this trend have varied widely.



The American Petroleum Institute, which represents Big Oil, offered support of actions by the Department of Interior to open up leasing on Federal lands (not offshore). An API spokesman praised actions by the Secretary of the Interior, a member of the President's cabinet, saying: "We look forward to working with the administration on smart policies that unlock investment and improve regulatory uncertainty for businesses, and ensure environmental stewardship."

The anti-Trump New York Times offered an Op-ed article titled "Trump's Risky Offshore Oil Strategy," by Bob Graham and William K Reilly, who chaired the National Commission that investigated the 2010 Deepwater Horizon tragedy.

Within a week of the request for comments, thousands of responses had been transmitted to the public commenting venue online at <https://www.regulations.gov/docket?D=BOEM-2017-0050> (<https://www.regulations.gov/docket?D=BOEM-2017-0050>) The first group of responses that had been posted were almost all from individual citizens in coastal states who were opposed to opening up additional lease tracts for offshore drilling. Agencies in Washington, DC considering changes in rules do indeed read these comments.

Recently, the US Coast Guard backed down from a plan that would have created 10 new anchorages for tugs and barges in areas of the Hudson River north of the Port of New York. In spite of industry support, the response from the general public, fueled by very effective outreach from environmental organizations and collected through a now shuttered online comment board at <https://www.regulations.gov/comment?D=USCG-2016-0132-0312> (<https://www.regulations.gov/comment?D=USCG-2016-0132-0312>), was overwhelmingly negative.

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