

Obama offers drilling plan

by Gerard Shields

Advocate Washington bureau

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Interior Department announced Tuesday that it will make available for exploration and development 75 percent of the estimated undiscovered oil and gas resources off the U.S. coast, including the Gulf of Mexico.

The plan was immediately criticized by Louisiana congressional delegation members as not going far enough.

U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the five-year lease program is in line with President Barack Obama's direction to continue to expand domestic production and cut America's reliance on foreign oil by a third before 2025.

The plan includes six offshore areas where there are currently active leases and exploration. Another 15 lease sales will be conducted, 12 in the Outer Continental Shelf in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Expanding safe and responsible oil and gas production from the OCS is a key component of our comprehensive energy strategy to grow America's energy economy and will help us continue to reduce our dependence on foreign oil and create jobs here at home," Salazar said in a statement.

Louisiana critics contend the Obama administration failed to capitalize on an opportunity to expand drilling even further. Louisiana delegation members said they would like to see more expansion in the Gulf, particularly on the eastern side, off Florida's coast, which isn't included in the plan.

The department chose not to allow leases off the coasts in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., took to the Senate floor within hours of the announcement to criticize the plan and call for the department to reconsider it.

"It's deeply disappointing that we're not moving forward in a far more aggressive and positive way into developing our own domestic energy resources," Vitter said.

Vitter said Obama threw out the last five-year plan, which called for 30 lease sales. The new plan contains half that much, he said. "Our energy needs are not moving backward, our desire and need for increased energy independence is not moving backward," he said.

U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., said in a prepared statement Tuesday evening: "I am still reviewing the details of this plan, but I am not yet confident that it is strong enough to meet our nation's energy needs or will help us reduce our dependence on foreign oil."

Landrieu said 1.4 million barrels of oil a day is extracted from the Gulf's Outer Continental Shelf.

In March 2010, Obama proposed opening vast tracts along the Atlantic coastline, the Gulf and the coasts of Alaska and northern California to oil and gas drilling. A month later, the BP Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, killing 11 men and resulting in a 4.9 million barrel discharge of oil into the Gulf.

The disaster caused Obama to impose a six-month drilling moratorium in the Gulf. The Interior Department moved forward Tuesday with the new plan contending that new regulations since the disaster will make drilling safer.

U.S. Rep. Jeff Landry, R-New Iberia, has frequently criticized the Obama administration's oil drilling policy. Landry said Tuesday that the key to the announcement was that most of the region opened has estimated reserves rather than proven oil fields.

"They can wrap up an unwanted present and make somebody want to open it," said Landry, who held up a sign that read "Drilling = Jobs" during a recent Obama address to the U.S. Congress.

U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise, R-Metairie, has also been a vociferous critic of the administration over its drilling policy. The new plan closes off places where Congress lifted a moratorium, such as the eastern part of Virginia, Scalise said.

"It looks like a step backward," Scalise said.

Chris John, president of the Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association, called the development bittersweet. "It's sweet because we have a plan," John said Tuesday evening. "It's bitter because it's a stale plan."

John said this plan is less than the president's original plan before BP Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Don Briggs, president of the Louisiana Oil and Gas Association, said of the plan, "That's bad news for consumers who, year after year, suffer from high energy prices."

Reserved