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OFFSHORE DRILLING

Zinke getting earful from Hill as comment period closes

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Lawmakers and groups are sounding off on the administration's offshore drilling plans as the comment period closes. Katie Howell/E&E News

The top Democrat on the House Natural Resources Committee, Rep. Raúl Grijalva of Arizona, said yesterday he plans to ask Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke about "the contradictions" between his proposed offshore drilling plan and his announcement that Florida was "off the table."

Grijalva said it's a disconnect that illustrates Zinke is "making some political accommodations along the way."

Zinke is expected to testify before several committees next week on behalf of the administration's 2019 budget request.

Zinke has said local voices matter in the debate over what the final offshore drilling plan looks like and that he's open to talking, especially to governors and local leaders, about their concerns.

Rep. Don McEachin (D-Va.), the ranking member of the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, attended the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management public meeting last month in Richmond, Va., and plans to submit a formal comment to BOEM opposing the plan before the deadline ends

today.

"It is imperative that we fight offshore drilling every step of the way because of the irreparable harms drilling would cause, now and for future generations," said McEachin.

"We know that offshore drilling jeopardizes the health of our oceans, our coastal communities, local businesses and even our national security," he added.

Yesterday, local officials from coast to coast spoke out against the plan, which would open 90 percent of America's federal waters to drilling, before congressional staffers at an event organized by Oceana, a conservation group.

"As indigenous people, we rely on what the land provides, and the ocean is a big part of that," said Adrienne Titus, an Inupiaq leader in Alaska. She spoke with tears in her eyes at the Oceana event.

"It [the water] is not something that only feeds our bodies, it feeds our souls," Titus said. "The threat of oil development, from seismic testing to the possibility of having an oil spill, would take away our communities, our cultures, who we are as a people in Alaska."

Zinke's proposed five-year plan to open up federal waters to oil and gas drilling has attracted vociferous and widespread opposition since he unveiled it in January. The draft puts the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic oceans in play for potential drilling.

As Diane Hoskins, Oceana's campaign director put it, "the administration and Zinke have managed to unite a large contingent of Republicans and Democrats along the coasts in opposition to proposed offshore drilling in their waters." Zinke threw gasoline on that fire after meeting with Florida Gov. Rick Scott (R) on Jan. 9 and afterward tweeting that he was "taking #Florida off the table for offshore oil and gas." He later called Florida unique, much to the anger of other states' leaders.

"I support the governor's position that Florida is unique and its coasts are heavily reliant on tourism as an economic driver," Zinke [tweeted](#).

Today marks the end of the 60-day public comment period on the department's draft proposal, which generated more than 500,000 comments, according to [Regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov).

Opponents of Zinke's plan — which is part of the administration's broader "energy dominance" initiative — wanted to extend the deadline another 60 days.

Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.), the ranking member of the Energy and Natural

Resources Committee, along with 22 other Democrats, sent Zinke a letter Monday asking for an extension.

But BOEM spokeswoman Tracey Moriarty said yesterday the comment period would end today as expected.

She outlined a tentative time frame for the overall process, including a proposed offshore drilling program expected to be unveiled later this year, with a 90-day comment period that will include public meetings. The proposed final plan is expected in late 2019, Moriarty said.

"This process provides the opportunity for the secretary to winnow the number of lease sales and areas under consideration based on the analyses and public input that accompanies each proposal," she wrote in an email.

The 2017-2022 national outer continental shelf plan, developed during the Obama administration and which continues to ban drilling in areas that Zinke wants to open up, "will continue to be implemented until the new National OCS program is approved," Moriarty said.

"The West Coast is probably the most intensive training and exercise area from a national security perspective," said Len Hering, a retired Navy rear admiral with a background in climate science and sustainable energy, who attended the Oceana event.

"I believe that if you read the documents that have been presented from the Department of Defense, they clearly indicate the impacts that this would have on our ability to train," he said.

Ben Cahoon, the Republican mayor of Nags Head, N.C., and an architect, said the town and Dare County have already spent almost \$40 million on a beach nourishment project and are about to start another multimillion-dollar renourishment project.

"Those projects were funded by our local tourism industry ... with no state or federal support," he said. Cahoon added that Nags Head, a town on the Outer Banks, has slightly fewer than 3,000 year-round residents but swells to a population of 40,000 in the summer.

Oceana on Wednesday released an economic analysis that estimated the administration's offshore drilling plan threatens 2.6 million jobs and nearly \$180 billion in gross domestic product.

The American Petroleum Institute, which represents the oil and gas industry, is having a press conference today on its new economic report that analyzes the potential benefits of energy exploration and development within the OCS.

Energy dominance

Panelists yesterday said government and industry should pursue more investment in alternative energy sources, like solar and wind. "The world is going to move away from fossil fuels at some point," Hering said.

"We don't have to, as a generation, think that our prosperity is tied to oil and gas," Hering added. "It's not. It's tied to a renewable energy source that affords us the progression and prosperity that we live in today, but not tied to what was made a million years ago because it is a finite resource."

Zinke has emphasized he's interested in an "all-of-the-above" energy development strategy as part of the Trump administration's overall goal of "energy dominance." That strategy ostensibly includes a reliance on more traditional energy sources, such as oil and gas, as well as some investment in renewable energy.

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