



Fed's offshore oil plan raises local concerns

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The possibility of having an offshore oil rig a handful of miles from Cape beaches is drawing concern from elected officials and preservation groups.

The Trump administration at the turn of the new year released its draft proposal that would enable energy companies to lease large swaths of ocean and drill for oil and gas in federal waters off both coasts and in the Gulf of Mexico.

Federal waters typically begin three miles from shore.

“Reckless does not begin to describe the Trump Administration’s decision to expand offshore oil and gas drilling coast-to-coast. This unprecedented move ignores concerns expressed by military leaders and the deep and widespread bipartisan opposition voiced by municipal and state representatives,” Rep. William Keating (D-Ninth Congressional District) said in a Jan. 5 statement.

“Allowing this drilling threatens the safety of our waterfront communities, the health of our oceans, and the future of our climate – not to mention the havoc it could wreak on the local economies of coastal communities, like those across New England, who count on fresh fish and clean beaches for their seafood and tourism industries,” he added.

The five-year plan is detailed in a document titled “2019-2024 National Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Draft Proposed Program, and is online at boem.gov.

The proposal, a few hundred pages long and broken into geographic territories, shows Massachusetts in the northern Atlantic section. The draft proposes two leases in the north Atlantic.

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management plans to hold 23 public meetings on the draft plan, including one at the Hyatt Regency Boston on Jan. 24.

The document didn’t come as a surprise. Trump last April issued an executive order establishing it as policy “to encourage energy exploration and production, including on the Outer Continental Shelf, in order to maintain the nation’s position as a global energy leader and foster energy security and resilience for the benefit of the American people, while ensuring that any such activity is safe and environmentally responsible.”

But the risk is too high, Association to Preserve Cape Cod declared in a letter it has sent to Walter Cruickshank, acting director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, which would issue and oversee the leases.

“It is with absolute certainty that an oil spill along the Atlantic’s outer continental shelf would be devastating to Cape Cod’s environment and economy,” wrote executive director Andrew Gottlieb.

“Opening the Atlantic to oil and gas drilling recklessly gambles our region’s future against short-term profits for private industry. Despite claims of safety improvements in offshore drilling, history has demonstrated too many times that catastrophic accidents can and do occur. No matter how much modern technology can claim to minimize the likelihood of a spill, it will never be worth the risk drilling poses to Cape Cod, or to other vulnerable regions along the Atlantic coast.”

Audra Parker, president and CEO of Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, said this week that the group’s mission is to “prohibit any type of industrial development.”

The alliance, fresh off the heels of a victory against Cape Wind, which recently relinquished its 16-year quest to develop a wind farm on Horseshoe Shoal, remains committed to securing long-term preservation of the Sound to protect traditional uses like recreation and fishing, said Parker.

The Cape Cod National Seashore did not respond to requests for comment. The Seashore is under the management of the federal National Park Service.

Gov. Charlie Baker is on record as opposed to the plan.

“The Massachusetts governor states that the Commonwealth does not support inclusion of areas of the North Atlantic adjacent to or affecting Massachusetts, and that neither exploration nor leasing has been justified in the North Atlantic for more than three decades and that model still holds true,” the draft plan states in a section devoted to local reaction.

The advocacy group Environment Massachusetts denounced the plan, saying it believes a lease could be issued for Georges Bank, a shoal located off the Commonwealth and extending along the edge of the Gulf of Maine, into Canadian waters.

The draft plan addresses the possibility of oil spills, saying that they are “are accidental and unauthorized events.”

It continues: “Industry practices and government regulations minimize the frequency of these spills, and industry and government entities are prepared to respond or prevent spills from reaching the coast should a spill occur. Despite these efforts, there is no way to

guarantee that oil spills will not occur.”

The government’s proposal says the plan would make about 98 percent of the U.S. continental shelf available for offshore drilling leases.