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Obama's offshore drilling proposal is a step forward

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President Barack Obama announced last month that the federal government will allow exploration and development for oil and gas in offshore waters that have been closed to drilling for decades. Predictably, the move was blasted by many in the environmental community for extending the national addiction to oil and criticized by some on the right for not going far enough to authorize domestic offshore drilling immediately. In reality, the administration's decision was just right — a reasonable, cautious move toward expanded drilling in U.S. waters that is one part of a comprehensive energy strategy, the first such energy strategy the country has had since

the Carter administration. It's also an acknowledgment of the plain fact that drilling in deep water can now be done safely, with minimal environmental impact.

One of the seminal environmental incidents of the 1960s, which helped galvanize the modern environmental movement, occurred in January 1969, when more than 200,000 gallons of crude oil spilled from a ruptured well six miles off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif. Thousands of fish, birds, dolphins, whales and seals were killed, and 35 miles of coastline was marred. It took workers 11 days to stanch the flow of oil from the well, weeks to mop up the residue left behind and years for the beaches to heal and the wildlife populations to recover. Within days of the event, 100,000 Californians had signed a petition calling for a moratorium on offshore drilling. And though the ensuing state moratorium was brief, within a year the state had enacted much more rigorous drilling restrictions.

The technology used to drill for oil and gas has evolved dramatically since the 1969 spill. The ability to drill multiple wells from a single platform has reduced the footprint of oil and gas operations. Drilling and pumping techniques have improved so that fewer wells are needed to produce the same amount of oil. Smaller-diameter holes — so-called "slim holes" — are often drilled, resulting in less drilling waste. Overall, the industry completes drilling projects more quickly than was possible 40 years ago, minimizing the disturbance of the seabed and the potential for spills during the drilling process.

The industry's record on spills has improved, too. Large spills from offshore operations are rare, causing only 2 percent of the total amount of oil pollution in the oceans. By comparison, the transportation of crude in tankers from the Middle East and elsewhere is responsible for 45 percent of the oceans' oil pollution. Even natural seepage from the ocean bottom causes four times as much oil pollution as drilling in the outer continental shelf. According to the Department of Interior's Minerals Management Service, 94 percent of the spills from offshore platforms or pipelines are less than one barrel of crude. Small spills and, occasionally, larger spills do occur, but the environmental track record for drilling platforms is impressive.

It is difficult to argue that more expansive domestic drilling alone will contribute much to the national quest for energy independence. Even the most optimistic estimates of our offshore reserves suggest that the potential supply would be enough to meet U.S. demand for only about a decade. But considered as one element of a broader strategy, careful development of offshore reserves makes sense. The context is important: The president made the offshore drilling announcement the day before the Environmental Protection Agency published ambitious fuel economy standards for cars and trucks that will result in substantial conservation of oil. The Obama administration has invested in renewable energy through the stimulus bill and formulated a policy to encourage the development of wind and solar power on public lands. Even nuclear power is part of the mix: The president announced in February his support for renewed research and investment in safe nuclear technology. In short, the strategy includes something for everyone — conservation, alternative energy and traditional fossil fuels — and a recognition that no one approach will be sufficient to meet our energy needs and solve the global challenge posed by climate change.

The essence of the president's announcement last week was merely a commitment to study and consider opening to drilling three offshore regions rich in oil and gas resources, so that they can be included in the government's next five-year leasing plan. It will take years to complete the seismic studies, environmental reviews and public meetings that are prerequisites to leasing blocks for drilling to oil and gas companies. There will be plenty of time, and plenty of process, during which concerns about potential spills and harm to marine species can be vetted and addressed. In the meantime, the country has a chance to see what a comprehensive energy policy looks like.

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