

# Deseret News

## Bush lifts offshore oil-drilling ban

*Hatch and Bennett support move*

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WASHINGTON — President Bush on Monday lifted an executive ban on offshore oil drilling and challenged Congress to follow suit, aiming to turn the enormous public frustration about gasoline prices into political leverage.

Democratic lawmakers rejected Bush's plan as a symbolic stunt.

With gas prices topping \$4.10 a gallon nationally, Bush made his most assertive move to extend oil exploration, an energy priority of his presidency. By lifting the executive prohibition against coastal drilling, Bush rescinded a White House policy that his own father put in place in 1990.

The move will have no practical effect unless Congress acts, too. Both executive and legislative bans must be lifted before offshore exploration can happen.

Bush had called on Congress a month ago to go first, then reversed himself on Monday. He said the country could no longer afford to wait.

"Failure to act is unacceptable. It's unacceptable to me, and it's unacceptable to the American people," Bush said in an event held in the Rose Garden.

"Democratic leaders can show that they have finally heard the frustrations of the American people by matching the action I've taken today, repealing the congressional ban and passing legislation to facilitate responsible offshore exploration," Bush said.

The president's direct link between record gas prices and offshore drilling glossed over a key point. Even if Congress agreed, the exploration for oil would take years to produce real results. It is not projected to reduce gas prices in the short term. Even the White House routinely emphasizes there is no quick fix.

That did not stop Bush from building his case around today's prices at the pump.

He said every extra dollar that families must spend on gas is one they could be using to put food on their table or to send a child to school. The American people, he said, are now "waiting to see what the Congress will do."

The White House says that acting now on a long-term solution would send a serious signal to the market that more oil supplies will be coming on line. That, in turn, could ease oil prices, advocates say. Business groups and many Republican lawmakers applauded the move to expand the energy supply in the United States.

Utah's senators were among the Republicans praising President Bush's repeal of the executive ban and his call for oil-shale development in Utah and the West. Bush urged Congress on Monday not only to follow his lead to allow offshore drilling, but also to "clear the way for our nation to tap into the extraordinary potential of oil shale, which could provide Americans with domestic oil supplies that are equal to more than a century's worth of current oil imports."

Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, said the ban on offshore exploration "is a relic put in place at a time of significant technological problems that have long since been solved. Hurricane Katrina proved to us that offshore drilling rigs are far safer than many have thought."

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said, "We must take off our self-imposed shackles and free up America to declare its energy independence from foreign oil. That means drilling offshore and tapping the nation's vast reservoirs of tar sands and oil shale."

Hatch and Bennett are co-sponsors of the GOP's proposed Gas Price Reduction Act. They say it would lift congressional moratoriums on offshore exploration and oil-shale development in the West, beef up regulations on oil speculators and provide more research money for development of electric vehicles.

Democrats were unmoved.

"The Bush plan is a hoax," responded House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. "It will neither reduce gas prices nor increase energy independence."

Several Democratic leaders in Congress said oil companies are already sitting on millions of acres of public and coastal lands.

Yet a proposal by Democrats to release oil from an emergency reserve has been rejected by the White House as a gimmick that won't reduce prices.

So the election-year stalemate remains.

Congressional Democrats, joined by some GOP lawmakers from coastal states, have long opposed lifting the prohibition that has barred energy companies from waters along both the East and West coasts and in the eastern Gulf of Mexico. A succession of presidents, including the current one, has sided with Congress for each of the last 27 years in barring drilling in these waters.

The main goal has been to protect beaches and coastal states' tourism economies.

Sen. John McCain, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, called Bush's move "a very important signal" and prodded his Democratic rival, Sen. Barack Obama, to drop his opposition to offshore drilling. "If we can show that we have significant oil reserves off our coasts, that will clearly affect the futures market and affect the price of oil," McCain said.

Obama favors another economic-stimulus package that includes energy rebates, as well as stepped-up efforts to develop alternative fuels. "If offshore drilling would provide short-term relief at the pump or a long-term strategy for energy independence, it would be worthy of our consideration, regardless of the risks," Obama spokesman Bill Burton said in a statement. "But most experts, even within the Bush administration, concede it would do neither."

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*Contributing: Lee Davidson, Deseret News.*