

From: Swift, Heather
To: [Megan Bloomgren](#)
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Trump to OK new offshore plan, reverse Arctic, Atlantic bans: sources

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The Trump administration is developing at least one order aimed at both a new five-year offshore oil and natural gas leasing plan and reversing an Obama administration decision to bar drilling in the majority of US Arctic waters and a large chunk of its Atlantic waters, according to industry sources who have spoken to Department of Interior officials working on these actions.

The details of the order, or separate orders or memorandums, are still being worked on, but are expected to be signed by President Donald Trump before the end of April, these sources said Thursday.

The new five-year offshore leasing plan, which could take years to complete, will replace the five-year plan the Obama administration finalized in November.

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That 2017-2022 federal leasing plan currently includes 10 sales in the Gulf of Mexico and one in Alaska's Cook Inlet over those five years, but does not include sales in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas, which were removed from the plan before it was finalized. A proposed Atlantic lease sale had been removed from the plan in March 2016.

The latest plan would include sales both in the Arctic and Atlantic, but when those sales may take place remains to be determined, sources said.

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The planned order is expected to direct Interior to start the process of reversing a December 20 decision by Obama to permanently block new oil and gas development in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas, covering about 115 million acres of Arctic waters, and about 3.8 million acres off the US East Coast, from Massachusetts to Maryland.

Obama blocked Arctic and Atlantic drilling through authority under Section 12(a) of the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act, a 63-year-old law that allows the president to "withdraw from disposition" any unleased lands in federal waters.

It remains unclear, legally, if Trump can reverse those Arctic and Atlantic drilling bans and any Trump order is expected to be challenged in court by environmental groups, the sources said.

"This will certainly be litigated," one source said.

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has said he planned to review all Obama decisions to block oil and gas drilling in most US Arctic waters and, during his Senate confirmation hearing in January, suggested a reversal of recent national monument designations may be in the works.

"Legally, it's untested," Zinke said during the hearing, conceding that even if the Trump administration decided to reverse an Obama designation it would face a certain legal challenge.

A Zinke spokeswoman on Thursday referred questions on the upcoming orders to the White House. A White House spokeswoman did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In addition to the offshore order, Interior this month is also expected to issue an order aimed at reversing some of Obama's national monument designations, according to sources.

On December 28, the White House announced Obama was designating 1.35 million acres of federal land in southeastern Utah and 300,000 acres of federal land just northeast of Las Vegas as new national monuments.

The administration frequently used the monument designation, allowed under executive authority in the 1906 Antiquities Act, to permanently safeguard federal land and waters from north-central Maine to the coast of Hawaii.

--Brian Scheid, brian.scheid@spglobal.com

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Heather Swift

Department of the Interior

@DOIPressSec

Heather_Swift@ios.doi.gov | Interior_Press@ios.doi.gov