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**Administration Proposes New Drilling Areas While Planning to Protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge**

On Jan. 27, the Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management (BOEM), part of the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI), announced its [draft Outer Continental Shelf oil and gas leasing plan](#) for 2017-2022.

The draft plan, which will be open for multiple rounds of public comment before being finalized, includes 14 potential lease sights including federal areas in the Atlantic Ocean (off the shores of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia) that have never before been open for natural gas or oil development. The plan prioritizes leasing areas to those that have high oil and gas potential, high industry interest or are on the coasts of states that have expressed interest in potential energy exploration.

Certain areas of the Gulf of Mexico, Alaska and the Pacific Ocean were also proposed for drilling leases through 2022. Additionally, the plan designated certain portions of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas in the Arctic as off limits from consideration for future oil and gas leasing.

Similarly, on Jan. 25, President Barack Obama [announced](#) that DOI, under his direction, will release a conservation plan to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in Alaska.

The president's recommendations include designating 12.28 million acres of the 19.8 million acres of ANWR, including the Coastal Plain, as wilderness. The "wilderness" designation is the highest level of protection given to public lands in the United States, and would prohibit any permanent roads, commercial enterprises, or oil and natural gas development on the land.

However, under the Wilderness Act of 1964, only the U.S. Congress has the authority to designate public land as "wilderness." Therefore, the president's plan would require congressional action before becoming law. If Congress were to enact this proposal, it would be the largest wilderness designation to date.

Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over these issues, has publicly stated in the past that she is in favor of utilizing ANWR for oil and natural gas development.

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