

Three Governors Appeal to Interior Nominee on Offshore Oil

STEVE SZKOTAK, Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — The Republican governors of Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina appealed Thursday to the president's choice for interior secretary to open waters off their states' coasts to gas and oil exploration.

In a letter to Sally Jewel, the governors asked her to support their quest to "prudently take advantage of abundant off-shore resources." They said energy production from the Atlantic's outer continental shelf would create 140,000 jobs within the next 20 years.

"During your nomination hearings, we will be listening intently to your answers regarding energy exploration off the coasts of our states and hope you will signal your willingness to revise the administration's current policy to one that is committed to safely harnessing our coast's vast natural resources," the governors wrote in their letters.

President Barack Obama selected Jewel to succeed Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, who is stepping down in March. She is the president and chief executive of Recreational Equipment Inc. and an outdoor enthusiast.

Waters off Virginia were first in line for oil and gas exploration with the scheduled sale of leases in 2012, but Obama delayed the sale until 2017. The delay came after the 2010 BP oil spill that killed 11 men and led to millions of gallons of oil spewing from an undersea well in the Gulf of Mexico. It was the worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history.

South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley has said an accident shouldn't stop the drive for drilling. If "there's a plane crash, we don't stop all the planes from flying," she said. McCrory came into office last month promising to push his counterparts in the two neighboring states to press for ocean energy drilling.

Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell, who has made energy independence a cornerstone of his administration, has repeatedly urged the administration to reconsider the delay, arguing that the industry and government regulators who oversee it have learned valuable lessons from the spill that will reduce the risks of a future accident at sea. He has found bipartisan support for his campaign, notably from Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., and former Sen. Jim Webb, another Virginia Democrat, who have sponsored bills to open the coast to exploration.

The government believes the Virginia leasing area could produce 130 million barrels of oil and 1.1 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Environmentalists have said that will provide the U.S. with six days of oil and 18 days of natural gas, based on current

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consumption trends and it's not worth the environmental risks to coastal tourism and commercial fishing.

"There just isn't much oil out there," said Jackie Savitz of the environmental group Oceana. "Even opening up all U.S. coasts to drilling won't lower the price of gas more than a few cents per gallon, and not until 2030."

The industry has questioned the oil and gas estimates, which they say are based on decades-old seismic studies. They said advanced testing techniques will likely discover more reserves.

McDonnell has argued the administration should at least allow testing.

Jewell's nomination must be approved by the Senate.

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Steve Szkotak can be reached on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/sszkotakap> [1].

Associated Press writers Seanna Adcox in Columbia, S.C., and Emery P. Dalesio in Raleigh, N.C., contributed to this report.

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