

Menendez, Feinstein, Merkley Lead Call for Acting Interior Head to Come Clean on Offshore Drilling

Publication info: Targeted News Service ; Washington, D.C. [Washington, D.C]20 Mar 2019.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

The office of Sen. Robert Menendez, D-New Jersey, issued the following news release:

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- Senators demand answers BEFORE critical nomination hearing

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Citing bipartisan concerns about the Trump Administration's push to expand offshore oil and gas drilling, U.S. Senators Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) today led a group of 17 senators in demanding answers from the current acting head of the Department of Interior prior to his upcoming confirmation hearing to permanently replace former Secretary Ryan Zinke.

Interior's Bureau of Ocean Management (BOEM) is expected to announce in the coming weeks the next draft of its five-year National Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Proposed Program for 2019-2024.

"[W]e strongly urge you to indicate which States will or will not be included in the next draft of the five-year plan prior to your nomination hearing before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee," the senators wrote to Acting Secretary David Bernhardt. "The American people deserve to know your plan for the Outer Continental Shelf before the Senate votes on your nomination."

The senators noted bipartisan requests to remove the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and Gulf of Mexico from the next draft of the five-year plan, as well as expressed concerns from coastal communities, local businesses, commercial and recreational fishing interests, and elected officials at all levels of government.

The lawmakers demanded answers from Bernhardt to a series of questions from whether he supports the expansion of offshore oil and gas drilling and the Department's efforts to address the risks of climate change, to steps taken to prevent a spill and committing to hold public hearings and meet with any coastal governor of any state that could be impacted by an oil spill.

"The American public and their elected representatives in Congress deserve to understand your vision for the OCS before we consider your nomination to serve as Secretary of the Interior," the letter continued.

The letter was signed by Sens. Menendez, Feinstein Merkley, Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), Ben Cardin (D-Md.), Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Kamala Harris (D-Calif.), Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), Cory Booker (D-N.J.), Maggie Hassan (D-N.H.), Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), Ed Markey (D-Mass.), Jack Reed (D-R.I.), Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), and Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.).

In Jan. 2018, the Trump Administration announced the largest planned expansion of offshore drilling in decades in the Atlantic, Arctic and Pacific Oceans and the Gulf of Mexico, including in areas previously blocked off the Jersey Shore and throughout the Atlantic from Florida to Maine.

Sen. Menendez helped lead the charge in 2015 to convince the previous administration to remove the Atlantic Ocean from its five-year plan for 2017-2022, and for President Obama to use his authority under the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act (OCSLA) before leaving office to ban oil and gas exploration in areas of the Atlantic Ocean.

Sen. Menendez plans to soon reintroduce his Clean Ocean and Safe Tourism (COAST) Anti-Drilling Act to ban offshore drilling in the Atlantic Ocean.

Full text of the letter is below.

March 20, 2019

The Honorable David Bernhardt, Acting Secretary, Department of the Interior, 1849 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20240

Dear Acting Secretary Bernhardt:

As the Senate considers your nomination to serve as Secretary of the Interior, we write in order to better understand your views on offshore drilling. The 2019-2024 National Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Draft Proposed Program has raised bipartisan concerns among coastal communities, local businesses, commercial and recreational fishing interests, and elected officials at all levels of government, and your decisions on this matter will significantly impact our nation's coastal economy and ecosystems.

The Department of the Interior has received many bipartisan requests to remove all planning areas in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as well as the eastern Gulf of Mexico, from the next draft of the five-year plan. We ask that you give these requests full and fair consideration. Further, we strongly urge you to indicate which States will or will not be included in the next draft of the five-year plan prior to your nomination hearing before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources committee. The American people deserve to know your plan for the Outer Continental Shelf before the Senate votes on your nomination.

To better understand your views on offshore drilling, we also request answers to the following questions prior to your hearing:

- 1) Do you support opening up any or all of the Atlantic Ocean to offshore oil and gas exploration, development, or production?
- 2) Do you support opening up any or all of the Pacific Ocean to offshore oil and gas exploration, development, or production?
- 3) Do you support opening up any or all of the Arctic Ocean to offshore oil and gas exploration, development, or production?
- 4) Do you support opening up any or all of the eastern Gulf of Mexico to offshore oil and gas exploration, development, or production?
- 5) What role, if any, did you have in the development of the 2019-2024 National OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Draft Proposed Program?
- 6) Will you commit to meeting with the Governor of any State off the coast of which offshore drilling is proposed?
- 7) Will you commit to meeting with the Governor of any State whose coastline may be impacted by a potential oil spill, even if the drilling will not occur directly off the coast of that State?
- 8) Will you commit to holding public hearings with meaningful, two-way engagement in any State off the coast of which offshore drilling is proposed?
- 9) Will you commit to holding public hearings with meaningful, two-way engagement in any State whose coastline may be impacted by a potential oil spill, even if the drilling will not occur directly off their coastline?
- 10) Will you commit to holding public hearings with meaningful, two-way engagement with indigenous peoples in any regions where offshore drilling is proposed?
- 11) How will you analyze the climate impacts of additional fossil fuel production proposed under 2019-2024 National OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Proposed Program?
- 12) How will you incorporate the findings of the 4th National Climate Assessment which state that "with continued growth in emissions at historic rates, annual losses in some economic sectors are projected to reach hundreds of billions of dollars by the end of the century—more than the current gross domestic product (GDP) of many U.S. states" in your analysis of the cost and benefits of specific leases under the 2019-2024 National OCS Program?
- 13) How will you reconcile the opposition to offshore drilling of every Atlantic and Pacific Governor—Democratic and Republican—with the current Draft Proposed Program, which calls for the opening of the entire East and West

Coasts to drilling?

14) What analysis and supporting evidence does the Department of the Interior have to conclude that the current Administration's revisions to the Well Control Rule will be equally as safe as the Well Control Rule finalized in 2016?

15) Has Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) sought review or input from outside, independent experts on offshore drilling safety not associated with industry groups or interests in developing its revisions to the Well Control Rule?

16) Under the authority provided by the Outer Continental Shelf Land Act (OCSLA), certain portions of the Arctic and Atlantic Ocean have been permanently protected from consideration for offshore drilling. If confirmed, will you honor these protections?

17) Former Secretary Zinke testified to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources that he intended to remove Florida from future offshore drilling programs because the State met three criteria: Congressional opposition; opposition from the Governor; and the State being under a federal offshore drilling moratorium until 2022. Given that the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic Oceans are under a federal offshore drilling moratorium through 2022 under the terms of the 2017-2022 OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program, will you commit to prohibiting offshore drilling for any State in which the Congressional delegation and the Governor express opposition? If not, why not? The American public and their elected representatives in Congress deserve to understand your vision for the OCS before we consider your nomination to serve as Secretary of the Interior. We strongly urge you to reply to this letter and to the numerous bipartisan letters, public comments, and requests you have received, and to indicate which areas will or will not be included in the next draft of the five-year plan before you testify in front of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee. Thank you for your consideration and your prompt response.

Sincerely,

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DETAILS

Subject:	Hearings & confirmations; Natural resources; Leasing; Offshore drilling; Climate change; Coasts; Oceans; Oil spills; Fishing; Governors; Public hearings; Congressional committees
Location:	Arctic Ocean Arctic region Maine New Jersey Florida Gulf of Mexico United States--US Pacific Ocean Atlantic Ocean
People:	Harris, Kamala Merkley, Jeff Van Hollen, Chris Sanders, Bernard Hassan, Maggie Schumer, Charles E Zinke, Ryan Booker, Cory A Whitehouse, Sheldon Obama, Barack Menendez, Robert Wyden, Ron Warren, Elizabeth Gillibrand, Kirsten E Feinstein, Dianne Blumenthal, Richard Markey, Edward J Reed, Jack
Company / organization:	Name: Senate-Energy & Natural Resources, Committee on; NAICS: 921120; Name: Congress; NAICS: 921120; Name: Department of the Interior; NAICS: 924120; Name: Senate; NAICS: 921120
Publication title:	Tar geted News Service; Washington, D.C.
Publication year:	2019
Publication date:	Mar 20, 2019

Dateline:	NEWARK, New Jersey
Publisher:	Targeted News Service
Place of publication:	Washington, D.C.
Country of publication:	United States, Washington, D.C.
Publication subject:	Public Administration
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2194521210
Document URL:	https://ezproxy.ivc.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2194521210?accountid=39837
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Last updated:	2019-03-21
Database:	Research Library

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