

SFGATE

Federal ‘open house’ on oil drilling angers activists in Sacramento

By **Melody Gutierrez** Updated 9:31 pm PST, Thursday, February 8, 2018



SACRAMENTO — Hundreds of Californians who traveled to the state Capitol to voice their opposition to President Trump’s plans to expand offshore oil drilling left a public hearing Thursday in anger and disbelief that there was no microphone or panel of federal officials to listen to their concerns.

Instead, the public hearing by the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management took the format of an open house consisting of science-fair-type displays — including one labeled “Why is Oil Important.” Federal scientists and technical staffers answered questions individually in what began as a polite and quiet gathering at the Sacramento public library.

The peace didn’t last long.

“Why are we being quiet?” Kacey Bridgman, who had traveled to Sacramento from

Soon attendees began to chant: “We want a hearing! We want a hearing!”

It was the only public hearing the Trump administration scheduled for California to allow the public to weigh in on the president's decision to allow **increased oil drilling off the coast.**

“This is a sham,” said Robin Gerber, a board member of Citizens for Responsible Oil and Gas who boarded a bus in Ventura County at 4 a.m. to attend the hearing. “We know (Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke) and his boss Trump are determined to hand over our oceans to the oil companies for profit.”

Bridgman said she was in disbelief at the format. “I expected someone to be listening to what the people have to say about offshore oil drilling. This is ridiculous.”

Many of the people who had traveled long distances for the hearing had expected — and wanted — to share their concerns aloud, publicly and with a microphone. Some confronted the federal officials. But participants who wanted to have their opinions recorded were directed to a bank of computers to silently log them there.

“This is like divide and conquer,” said a visibly irritated David Thompson of San Francisco. He pressed Brian Jordan, the ocean energy bureau's chief of environmental consultation, on why the agency chose an “open house” format.

“I did the old format, with the public hearing and four officials sitting behind a table and a microphone in the middle of the crowd and people have three minutes to talk into it over and over and over again,” Jordan said. “We are hoping by this process that people understand how to make more meaningful comments that will actually affect the process.”

Jordan added that the “open house” format has been used for other projects, including those proposed under President Barack Obama.

“Well, this format is stupid,” Thompson said.

A rally by protesters of oil drilling was held at the state Capitol before the hearing. Another rally was staged at a park outside the hearing. Many protesters who were at the second rally didn't bother to walk across the street to the public library for the meeting upon learning about the open-house format.

Trump signed an executive order last year requiring the Interior Department to reconsider drilling bans signed by Obama. He wants to open swaths of the Pacific, Atlantic and Arctic oceans that aren't part of the federal government's oil leasing plan already to energy companies.

The federal government could offer oil drilling leases in 47 areas off the coast of the United States from 2019 to 2024, including six areas across California's coast, under the plan being considered. The exact locations have not yet been determined, but two would be in Northern California, two on the Central Coast and two in Southern California.

There are now 23 offshore oil and gas facilities in federal waters off California's coast and four platforms in state waters, according to the state lands commission.

"Federal administration, get the message: We love our coast, and we want you to leave our coast alone," Assemblywoman Catharine Baker, R-San Ramon, said at the Capitol rally.

Added Assemblyman Al Muratsuchi, D-Torrance (Los Angeles County): "We are united in fighting back against Trump's latest stupid idea to reopen up oil drilling."

Muratsuchi and state Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson, D-Santa Barbara, introduced legislation last month to ban pipelines from being built in California waters. A similar effort stalled last year.

The **California State Lands Commission** and the California Coastal Commission sent letters Wednesday to the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management urging the agency to withdraw the ocean drilling plans. The lands commission said it would not issue any permits to the federal government to transport new oil using existing or new pipelines.

California placed a moratorium on new oil and gas leases in 1969, after a huge oil spill on the Santa Barbara coast.

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