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Bush lifts presidential ban on offshore oil drilling

Elana Schor in Washington
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George Bush has today lifted a presidential ban on oil drilling off American coastlines that was first signed by his father – a symbolic move aimed at pressuring Congress into lifting its own similar ban.

Skyrocketing gas prices in the US have set off feverish political debates over offshore drilling, which was banned by Congress in 1982 and by former president George HW Bush in 1990.

Most Democrats point out that drilling off the coast of Florida, California, and other states would have a negligible effect on the nation's current fuel crisis but a potentially devastating effect on tourism as well as the environment.

Bill Nelson, Florida's Democratic senator, noted that US oil companies already control large tracts of land in the Gulf of Mexico where they have not yet begun testing for future drilling.

"The fact is, the industry should be sinking wells in areas already under lease, before demanding control of millions of new acres or destroying long-protected lands," Nelson said in a statement.

"Clearly, Americans are being gouged. But we cannot allow the administration to take advantage of the situation to give away the store before the president leaves office."

Yet Bush and his fellow Republicans, including presidential hopeful John McCain, argue that the absence of short-term relief from high gas prices is no reason not to begin an offshore drilling process that would take years to bear fruit.

Bush has argued that one of the reasons gas prices are climbing is that offshore areas remain off-limits to drilling. His administration claims that as many as 18bn barrels of oil could eventually be harvested from US coastal areas.

The 26-year-old congressional drilling ban remains valid despite Bush's move, and Democratic leaders have shown little interest in lifting it even as they discuss a possible deal with Republicans on energy.

Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama, in fact, was one of the first to criticise the administration's continued pursuit of more domestic drilling.

"If offshore drilling would provide short-term relief at the pump or a long-term strategy for energy independence, it would be worthy of our consideration, regardless of the risks," Obama spokesman Bill Burton said in a statement.

"But most experts, even within the Bush administration, concede it would do neither. It would merely prolong the failed energy policies we have seen from Washington for 30 years."