Chronology of Moratoria on Offshore Drilling

From 1981 through 1986, the Senate was controlled by a Republican majority, the House had a Democratic majority, and Republican Ronald Reagan was President. It was during this time that the first moratoria on oil and gas leasing were put in place.

In 1981, Congress voted to stop the sale of leases off the coast of Northern California. The moratorium was included in the Interior Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 1982. The provision was supported by almost every member of the California delegation from both political parties. It was approved by the House and by the Republican-majority Senate, and signed it into law by President Reagan.

In 1982, Congress extended the moratorium for Northern California and expanded the area to include the Central California coast. The House also approved an amendment by Republican Congressman Jim Courter to prohibit leases off the coast of New Jersey. Again, the majority-Republican Senate approved the bill and Reagan signed it into law.

In 1983, the moratoria on offshore leases were continued in Northern and Central California and were expanded to include Southern California, the Florida Gulf Coast, and the Georges Bank off the coast of New England. Republican and Democratic Members of the California and Florida delegations pushed for the moratoria. The Republican-majority Senate approved the Interior Appropriations Act and President Reagan signed it into law.

In 1984, the Interior Appropriations Act for FY 1985 continued the ban on offshore leases off the coasts of California and New England.

In 1985, Donald Hodel replaced James Watt as Secretary of the Interior. Secretary Hodel began negotiating an agreement with Congress to prohibit leases off many coastal areas in exchange for the authority to lease tracts in a few areas. Hodel began negotiating with the California Delegation. Republican Congressman Bill Lowery of San Diego, a member of the Appropriations Committee, was a leading advocate for continuing the moratorium on leases off Southern California throughout his Congressional career.

In 1986, the Interior Appropriations Act for FY 1987 included an agreement to delay offshore lease sales off the coast of California until 1989, after the end of the Reagan Administration. The Republican-majority Senate approved the moratorium and President Reagan signed it into law.

Democrats gained majority control of the Senate in the 1986 election. From 1987 through 1992, the House and Senate had Democratic majorities while the President was a Republican. During this time, the only major change in offshore leasing policy was President George H.W. Bush's executive order to implement a 10-year moratorium on drilling off the coasts of California, Florida, and New England.

The Exxon Valdez spill off the Alaskan Coast in March 1989 increased environmental concerns. The Interior Appropriations Act for FY 1990 includes moratoria on leases off of California, Florida, Massachusetts, Bristol Bay of Alaska, and the Atlantic Ocean from Rhode Island to Maryland. President Bush signed the bill into law.

In June 1990, President George Bush announced a 10-year moratorium on drilling off California, Florida, and New England. The Interior Appropriations Act for FY 1991 included one-year bans on leases for areas not covered in Bush's order, including Bristol Bay in Alaska, the Florida Panhandle, and the Atlantic from New Jersey to Maryland.

From 1991 to 2007, the Interior Appropriations Act for each year included moratoria on drilling except off the coasts of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and parts of Alaska. There was no significant change in policy toward offshore drilling even though Republicans controlled Congress for twelve years from 1995 through 2006.

In 1998, President Bill Clinton extended the moratoria on offshore leases off the coasts of California, Florida, and New England until 2012. These moratoria had been instituted by President George H.W. Bush in 1990.

In 2002, the George W. Bush Administration announced a settlement with Chevron, Conoco, and Murphy under which the federal government paid them $115 million to relinquish leases off the Florida Panhandle. The Administration entered into these negotiations at the urging of the President's brother Jeb, the Governor of Florida.

Interior Secretary Gale Norton also proposed to pay the Collier family $120 million to relinquish mineral rights in the Everglades, and allow the Colliers to take a $350 million tax deduction. The Colliers said the mineral rights were worth $472 million, but the National Park Services estimated they were worth $20 million and the Inspector General of the Department of Interior estimated they were worth no more than $43 million. Congress blocked the deal, but the Colliers continue to threaten to drill in the Everglades in order to try to force the government to buy them out.

During a lame duck session in December 2006, Congress and President Bush opened up a few portions of the Central Gulf of Mexico to new lease sales. This was the only expansion of offshore leasing during the six years that the Republicans controlled the House, the Senate, and the Presidency.

Since 1981, Congress has included the moratorium in the interior appropriations bill for each fiscal year. The interior appropriations bill takes effect on October 1 of each year, and expires on September 30 of the following year. Congress has not passed an interior appropriations bill for fiscal year 2009. Because of this, the moratorium will expire on September 30. The ban will be lifted October 1, the start of the new fiscal year.