

Remember last year when gas was at \$4 a gallon, and candidates were falling all over themselves to explain how they would bring that price down? Two longstanding moratoria against oil and gas development in federal waters fell to that political pressure. In July, [George W. Bush lifted an executive ban](#), initially issued by his father in 1990 and covering most of the nation's coasts, with the exception of parts of Alaska and the Gulf Coast. In the fall, Congress [allowed its own moratorium](#), renewed annually since 1981, to expire.

It looks like the mood is different this year. Nationwide, gas prices are [below \\$2 per gallon](#) again, and the thirst for offshore drilling seems to have abated. At the very last minute before George W. Bush left office, his Interior Department [proposed to open](#) a number of new offshore areas to oil and gas leasing. But today the new Interior Secretary, Ken Salazar, [extended the comment period](#) on that proposal, and directed the Minerals Management Service and US Geological Survey to report on offshore energy resources (renewable as well as conventional) and the environmental impacts of developing those resources. And tomorrow the [House Committee on Natural Resources](#) will begin a series of three hearings on off-shore oil drilling. The Committee's web site [describes this first hearing](#) as exploring "the need for environmental protections for the OCS [outer continental shelf] and the importance of our oceans as a valuable national resource for all Americans to enjoy." The featured witnesses include Ted Danson and Philippe Cousteau. That can't be good news for oil companies.