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Conservationists push White House to postpone next week's Gulf drilling auction

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WASHINGTON — The government is getting ready to sell drilling rights spanning as much as 22 million acres of the Gulf of Mexico, but environmentalists are campaigning for the White House to call off that auction until Congress reauthorizes a longstanding conservation program funded by offshore oil development.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell already has been touring the country to lobby for a renewal of the 50-year-old Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is set to expire Sept. 30 unless Congress intervenes.

But conservationists say the Obama administration needs to up the stakes by putting offshore drilling rights on the line. A liberal think tank first advanced the idea last month, and it has quickly taken hold among conservationists, despite the long odds for success.

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Environment America is rolling out online advertisements featuring a smirking Teddy Roosevelt, the 26th president who prioritized conservation. Nearly 50,000 people have signed a [petition](#) calling on the administration to postpone offshore lease sales until the LWCF is renewed. And on Monday in New Orleans, a former Kansas City Chiefs player and zydeco musician will make the same plea alongside leaders from Environment America, the Gulf Restoration Network and the Louisiana Bucket Brigade.

All of the activity reflects building “anxiety about the state of the LWCF,” said Matt Lee-Ashley, a senior fellow with the Center for American Progress, which first called for the lease sale cancellation. “The clock is winding down and the prospect of the funds from this lease sale not going where they’ve been promised is very real.”

Created in 1965, the Land and Water Conservation Fund is the main source of money for land acquisition by four federal agencies, including the National Park Service and the Forest Service. It also provides matching grants to help states build outdoor recreational facilities and buy new lands and waters for recreation.

Congress viewed the program as a way to blunt the impacts of offshore drilling — by steering some of the resulting revenue to parks, open spaces and recreational areas. Over the past five decades, some \$17 billion has flowed through the fund, with much of it being siphoned from the oil and gas royalties companies pay the federal government for offshore production.

The program is generally popular, but some lawmakers want to give states more control and steer more LWCF dollars to maintenance instead of new land acquisitions.

A broad energy bill advanced by a Senate panel last month would revise the LWCF — ensuring at least 40 percent of funding is granted to states — while permanently reauthorizing the program. But it is unclear whether that energy legislation will be fully debated, much less pass the Senate before the LWCF expires. And the chances of the House quickly moving that broad energy bill or a discrete LWCF reauthorization are slim.

In a bid for renewal, some LWCF backers on Capitol Hill have threatened to withhold support for a separate program popular with Western lawmakers.

In a July 20 letter, 21 senators insisted that the LWCF should be reauthorized at the same time Congress renews Payments in Lieu of Taxes, or PILT, a program that gives federal dollars to local governments to offset the loss of potential property taxes from non-taxable federal lands.

“We recognize the priority many members of Congress place on county-payment programs like payments in lieu of taxes,” said the Democratic senators, including Patrick Leahy of Vermont, Kirsten Gillibrand of New York and Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, both of California. “We

would oppose efforts to extend funding and reauthorization of PILT without taking similar action to reauthorize and fully fund LWCF."

There is no indication federal officials are seriously considering any delays to the Western Gulf of Mexico auction, scheduled for Aug. 19 in New Orleans. Energy companies are now finalizing their sealed bids for the available acreage, which includes tracts hugging the Texas coast.

But Jewell highlighted the issue during a Thursday visit to Ohio and April trips to Georgia and Virginia. On Friday, she is set to talk up the Land and Water Conservation Fund in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

As "the only federal funding source solely dedicated to establishing local public parks, conservation and recreation areas," Jewell said, the LWCF helps "create outstanding outdoor spaces for all people from all backgrounds to enjoy."

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